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ILLUSTRATION AZURU

# 魔女の旅々

THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA

著 白石定規  
イラスト あずーる

# **Majo no Tabitabi**

– The Journey of Elaina –

**- Volume 3 -**

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**[ Fushigi Translations ]**



彼女は旅人であり、  
魔女でした。

She is a traveler and is also a witch.

## 灰の魔女イレイナ

魔法使いの最高位「魔女」となった少女。  
幼少に読んだ物語の影響を受け、  
あてのない一人旅を続ける。



「薫衣の魔女」エステル

時計郷ロストルフに暮らす優秀な魔女。  
イレイナに勝るとも劣らない天才少女。

セレナ

時計郷ロストルフに暮らす  
富豪の少女。  
エステルとは親友の間柄。



「夜闇の魔女」シーラ

魔法統括教会に所属する魔女。  
イレイナと「斬り裂き魔」を追う。



?????  
イレイナの魔法で  
擬人化した、ある「道具」。  
持ち主によく似た  
外見をしている。





「分からないんですか？」

「それとも分からない振りですか？」

「馬鹿にしないでください！」

——それから私達は

小さな戦争を始めました。





# Chapter 1

## A Certain Woman's Troubles

A witch was working as a seer at a street corner at night.

The witch, whose ash-gray hair and azure eyes were her distinguishing features, sat quietly on a cloth that was spread over the ground.

She was wearing a black robe, a black tricorne, and a star-shaped brooch that was proof of her being a witch.

Far above the houses on either side of the street, the stars twinkled and imparted a dazzling radiance to the crystal ball that lay close at hand.

The girl was a traveler, as well as a witch.

“Seer-san~ I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Haa.”

The witch frowned as she looked at the drunk woman sitting in front of her.

For certain reasons, she was currently working as a seer.

The truth was that she was running out of money, so she was earning small change by pretending to be a seer.

“You’ve got to listen to my story~”

“I will still charge you one gold coin just for listening to your troubles. Is that okay?”

Who was this girl who was demanding an absurd amount of money while silently hoping that this annoying client would give up and leave?

That’s right, it’s me.

Unfortunately, the woman in front of me was quite wealthy.

○

In the first place, why does a seer have to work as a life counsellor?

I wanted to make at least one complaint of that sort, but since I had already accepted the money, there was no choice. I decided to listen to her complaints.

The woman looked like she was already too far gone, but no matter how annoying it was, I had to listen to her story because I had already received my fee.

“I~ work as a waitress in a nearby restaurant~”

“Haa.”

“I don’t want to work there anymore~”

“Then why don’t you just quit?”

“Customers these days are horrible, you know? They always look for reasons to complain, if they find you making so much as a single mistake, they smugly complain about it, also, they make complaints, and then they make complaints as well.”

“Looks like they don’t do much other than complaining.”

“That’s right! What’s more, the language they use is completely unwarranted. There are even people who have taken to using a phrase from a nearby country and saying [Customers are Gods]. ”

“Fumu fumu.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Maybe they’ll stay silent if you pray to them or something?”

“I’m asking a serious question, you know? Hic.”

“I’m really not sure how to respond.”

“I mean, it’s true that I am an employee, and the customers are paying for service, but I just feel like saying ‘So what?’ Sure, we are receiving money from the customers, but we are also providing the items that the customers are looking for.”

“Hoho.”

“That’s why, I think that we are on equal footing. If they are going to complain so much, we won’t make any food for them either!”

“No, I don’t think you’re on equal footing.”

“Come on. Seer-san, I’m paying you one gold coin, so listen to me properly. I’m a customer, you know?”

“I think you should just take back everything you said earlier.”

“Uuu... I can’t take it anymore. I want to quit working.”

“Then why don’t you just go ahead and quit?”

“But I have no money.”

“You just gave me a gold coin earlier, though.”

“That’s my entire savings.”

“I will return it to you.”

“Seer-san, you’re so kind... Uuu... I had no idea that there were such kind people in this world... I suppose this world isn’t beyond saving after all...” she sobbed.

“.....”

“Say, Seer-san, what do you think I should do?”

“Let’s see... I have just one piece of advice for you.”



“...? What is it?”

“I think you should be a little more honest with yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“If someone makes a complaint to you, you should just say something back in return. Let them know how you truly feel.”

“I wouldn’t be having such a hard time if I could do something like that!”

“I have just the thing for you.”

“Hmm? What’s in this bottle?”

“It’s magical water. It will let you reveal your true feelings.”

“Amazing...! I had no idea such water existed...!”

“It does. Here, take it. I’ll let you have it for free. Drink this, and work hard at your job from tomorrow.”

“...Uuu. No. I don’t want to work.”

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

After that, the woman spent several tens of minutes complaining about things in front of my stall, and eventually said, “Ah, I need to use the restroom,” and then left. She had gulped down the water I gave her and exclaimed, “Amazing! I feel like the real me has returned at last!”

“.....”

Well, that was actually just regular water.

Once the alcohol wears off and she calms down a little, I’m sure she’ll return to her original self.

Later on, a waitress from a certain restaurant became famous throughout that country.

She was apparently a horrible woman who hurled abuse at customers. When customers indicated that they wanted to order something, she would click her tongue while going over to the table, and present them with a contemptuous gaze when bringing them their food. When collecting the money, she never forgot to say “Ha? Don’t ever come back, you hear?”

For some reason, this eccentric behavior was very popular with customers (mainly men) who flocked to the shop, saying, “I want to be abused!” thereby causing the restaurant to become prosperous in the blink of an eye. It appears the people of this country are a little off. No doubt they are so hard on the waitresses because they take some sort of strange pleasure in watching a girl get depressed. This country is full of people who are a little off.

That woman is now the main attraction of that restaurant.

The restaurant is very crowded every day.

I wonder, what caused her to become like this?

There was an interview that was published in a certain newspaper.

She said, [I think it’s really important to reveal your true feelings.]

.....

That’s not what I meant...



## Chapter 2

### A Peaceful Sleep

It was the season where cold and warmth mixed.

The wind blowing over the plains still carried a hint of the smell of winter.

The first rays of the spring sun were warm, which only served to make the chill in the air all the more noticeable. The girl who was flying over the flowering weeds on her broom looked forward while occasionally rubbing her arms.

She was a witch, as well as a traveler.

She wore a black robe and a tricorne, and had a star-shaped brooch on her chest that was the proof of her being a witch.

The gray hair that peeked out from under her tricorne fluttered in the cold wind.

Her azure eyes were turned towards a small country that stood inconspicuously between the blue sky and the plains.

“So that’s the next country.”

Oh, and by the way.

Who was this girl who continued to travel as usual through this usual scenery?

That’s right, it’s me.

As usual.

“Excuse me, is someone there?”

I raised my voice and said that after getting off my broom in front of the gate, but there was no reply.

The gate was wide open and looked like it was inviting travelers inside; however, the interior of the country was filled with a persistent silence, which was troubling.

What's this? Can I just go ahead and enter without permission? I was expecting a guard to be at the gate, at least.

Well, if no one is going to come out, then it must mean that I can just go ahead and enter.

And so, I decided to step inside the country.

“...Hoho.”

I was greeted by the sight of traditional-looking houses. They had brick walls of a subdued color and the roofs were tiled, and they stood in rows on either side of the street. The walls had small cracks running through them and were a little dirty, and although the dirt was conspicuous, it felt like part of the scenery of this city which had a sense of unity.

As if to emphasize the calm atmosphere, the interior of the city was wrapped in silence.

It felt like there was nobody in this country at all.

After walking through the city for a little while, I came upon a large plaza.

I came to a stop over there.

There was a large hole in the plaza, and the dirt that had been dug up from there was piled to the side like a mountain. Although the city was entirely devoid of people, I could see traces of people having been here.

“.....”

When I looked into the hole, the reason why I didn't see anybody in the country was made readily apparent.

People wrapped in scraps of cloth had been piled inside the hole. There was a massive number of them.



The reason why I didn't see anybody in the country was because they were all gathered here.

“—Nnn. Who's there?”

When I was dazedly staring into the hole, I heard a voice. It was a woman's voice.

When I looked around, I saw a woman riding a broom and looking down at me while holding a staff in one hand. Her hair was made up in a single ponytail at the back of her head, but she was not wearing a robe or a tricorne.

However, it was obvious that she was a magician, and there were several people floating behind her broom. It looked like she was levitating them with magic.

She spoke while gently lowering them inside the hole.

“You're not from this country, are you?”

I nodded and replied,

“I'm a traveler. I came across this place while I was riding on my broom.”

“I see... Did you perhaps intend on staying here for a while?”

“Yes, I did.”

Until I saw this disastrous scene, at least.

“You probably shouldn't do that.”

“Yes, that appears to be the case.”

The woman nodded and gently landed in front of me. She was about one head taller than me, so I was looking up at her while she gazed down at me.

“You've seen what kind of state this country is in, and this place will be closed down by tomorrow.”

“.....What happened here?”

It looks like everyone is dead...

As if she guessed my thoughts after seeing me look towards the hole, she also looked at the hole that she had just added more people to a moment ago and said,

“These people are all asleep.”

And then,

“They are in a sleep resembling death.”

Saying that, she lowered her gaze.

○

Apparently, there used to be a famous seer in this country.

From a young age, the seer worked for the sake of the country and predicted things like the weather, whether the harvest would be abundant or they would have a poor crop, the location of pets that had disappeared from their homes, what kind of fortune people would have on any given day, and even things like a person’s lifespan and the person they were fated to marry.

Although not all of his predictions were accurate, it appeared that there was a strange magic in the seer’s words as his predictions very rarely failed: most of them came true. Apparently, even if his prediction failed to come true, it would be settled with a convenient explanation like, “The prediction must have failed because we had already heard about what was going to happen.” It appeared that the people of this country were a superstitious bunch.

The people were intoxicated by the power of the seer, came to rely on his predictions, and ran to him for advice as soon as something happened. By the time the seer got on in age and his face became creased with wrinkles, he was apparently the most important person in the country.

The woman I met earlier—her name was Charlotte—was also apparently a believer of that seer.



However, even though he was called a seer and had the power to see the future, he could not resist when it was time for him to die.

About half a year ago, the seer passed away peacefully as if he was just going to sleep, while surrounded by a large number of people.

His death caused the people of the country to become terribly afraid.

It wasn't because they had lost the seer.

On the verge of death, the seer had left behind a terrible prediction.

"This country will fall into ruin half an year from now," he said.

Nobody knew the precise time after half a year when the country would be ruined, or even why it would be ruined.

However, due to the seer's track record, his vague final words sowed an unbearable fear within the hearts of the people.

After that, most of the citizens abandoned the country before half a year came to pass. They must have been afraid of dying along with the country more than anything.

In the end, less than a hundred people remained in the country. They must have loved their country more than anything.

They lived quietly, even as they trembled in fear of their death, which might have visited itself upon them at any moment.

And then, four days ago.

Charlotte-san said that when she went to bed as usual, she saw a strange dream.

"Hey there. You're Charlotte, aren't you?"

She saw a demon in her dream.

The demon was strange. It looked just like her, but it had twisted horns growing out of its head and bat-like wings on its back.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the one who will fulfill your wish. You’re living in this country so that you can die here, right? I’ll fulfill your wish in your dream because I feel so sorry for you. It can be anything. Just tell me what your wish is. I will show you an ideal world.”

“Eeh, that seems really suspicious...”

“I’m a demon, after all.”

Although the logic was questionable, it was a dream after all, so she thought that such absurdity was only to be expected and ceased to pry too deeply into the matter.

“Now, what is your wish? I will give you three days in your ideal world.”

“.....”

It was a dream after all, so she didn’t retort.

And so, she made her wish.

“In that case, I want to be a magician.”

She told me that the next three days in her dream were really perfect. She flew freely through the sky on her broom, levitated all sorts of things with magic, and lived while using magic however she wished.

The time she spent in that dream went by in a flash as one would expect from a dream, and at noon on the third day, the demon once again appeared before her.

“Well, how was it? Did you have fun? By the way, you can continue to stay in this dream if that is your wish. Even if you go back to the real world, there’s nothing to do there except wait for your death, right? In that case, wouldn’t it be more fun to keep living in this dream?”

That made sense. Even if she woke up from the dream, the only thing waiting for her was a sad life where she could only wait to die.

However, she did not consent to stay within that dream.

“Why not?”

After hearing her story up to that point, I asked her that out of curiosity.

In reply, Charlotte-san said,

“Just think about it. True, continuing to live inside that dream sounded wonderful, and there was no need to wait for my death. But can you really call that living? No matter how pleasant it is, a dream has to end eventually, right? At some point, you have to return to your real life. Even if death is just around the corner, I think that shutting yourself away in an ideal dream world can’t really be called living.”

“.....You may be right.”

“That’s why I rejected the demon’s offer.”

The demon looked at her shaking her head, and just said “I see,” as if it understood what was going through her mind. It was a really indifferent response.

And then,

“If you’re going back to the real world, I’ll give you a parting gift. Something to remember me by.”

“.....Haa.”

Charlotte-san nodded while thinking that it really was a strange dream.

“You became a magician in your dream, right? So I’ll make you capable of using magic in the real world as well. When you wake up, you should be able to use magic, just like you did in your dream.”

“.....Haa.”

Charlotte-san said “Thank you,” while thinking to herself that there was no way something like that could really happen. She appeared to be only mildly interested.

Perhaps she had given up on everything because she thought that it was only a dream, and once she returned to the real world, the only thing awaiting her was death.

“I’ve made enough of a profit from all the human lives I’ve taken here that I can afford to make you a magician—so this is a gift. Feel free to use it as you wish in the real world.”

In the end, the demon smiled. Charlotte-san told me that it was clearly a fake smile.

And so, she was released from her dream.

“Although it sounds incredible, I became capable of using magic, just like the demon told me in my dream. I can fly through the sky on a broom, and can levitate all manner of things using magic.”

Charlotte-san talked like she wasn’t really interested in the matter.

“I’m sure the others have also woken up from their dream and received something wonderful—or so I thought as I flew around the country.”

“.....”

“The result is what you see here.”

“.....None of them had woken up?”

She calmly nodded.

“They appear to have breathed their last inside their blissful dreams.”

○

By the time she had woken up, the other citizens had passed away while looking like they were still asleep. The reason for that was obvious.

Charlotte-san dug a hole for the citizens who had passed away, wrapped their soulless bodies in cloth, and threw them inside.

“By the way, the ones I put inside earlier were the last. I’m the only person left in this



country.”

“What do you plan to do from now on?”

“Let’s see. For now, I plan to leave the country once I finish covering up this hole. To tell you the truth, I intended to die along with this country. I intended to accept the destruction that was sure to come. But instead, I obtained magic. It would be wasteful to just wait to die.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m going to leave this country.”

Saying so, she waved her staff.

A large amount of dirt covered the piled bodies, and eventually, all traces of the hole disappeared.

○

I decided to leave the country on the same day.

Although there was no one around and the country was basically done for, I didn’t want to stay for long in this country with a creepy atmosphere.

And so, after saying a brief goodbye to Charlotte-san, I went out of the gate and once again headed towards the plains.

“.....”

In the end, that country would probably cease to exist by tomorrow.

As the Seer had predicted, every citizen of the country had disappeared in the six months after his death. If the Seer hadn’t said anything, perhaps the country would not have been ruined.

Or perhaps the ruin of this country was inevitable.

This conclusion was most likely brought about by the trusting hearts of the people

who lived here, and the demon that took advantage of them.

No matter what the circumstances, if you only think about bad things, then you will end up seeing everything negatively. However if you only focus on the things that are convenient to you, you will be blind to the world and might lose your life before you know what went wrong. Just like the citizens who were trapped in their dreams and lost their lives.

“.....”

I suppose that the moral of this story is that everything should be done in moderation, and if you allow your feelings to swing too much to either extreme, you'll end up breaking.

And so.

I'll leave aside the good and bad things for now.

I continue my unchanging, indifferent journey.

As usual.

# Chapter 3

## The Newspaper on One Particular Day

How do you do!? I'm Elaina! The Witch of Ashes, Elaina!

I've been going on one journey after another for the past few years, and I've been staying in this country for the past few days!

I'm a super-beautiful witch with my characteristic beautiful grey hair and azure eyes! I usually wear a black tricorn and a black robe. If you see me around town, don't be afraid to say hello! Ufufu.

By the way, this country is really amazing! By all means, the food is delicious! I've never been to a country that has had such delicious food! The food from this country is undoubtedly the best in the world! It is simply wonderful! Everything gets a three-star rating! The restaurants that serve food, the cafes that sell coffee, and even the street stall vendors who sell bread, they can undoubtedly be proud of the fact that they are the best in the world.

What's more, the scenery is also amazing! The sky is extremely clear, and at night you can see a sky full of stars.

From the viewing platform, you can see a range of mountains decorated with snow-capped peaks, and if you listen carefully, you can hear the gentle breeze.

It's really just too wonderful!

The food and scenery alone already make this place unbelievably wonderful, but this country still has more to offer!

The streets of the city and the people who live here are so wonderful that everything else pales in comparison!

There are rows of buildings, each one with a long history, and every resident speaks to me with a smile. Should I get lost they come to help me right away, and the people

in every store treat us customers as if we were gods.

When I tried to leave a tip after eating, I was told, “That’s not required, we only did what was natural.” This is the first time that that has happened! Amazing! Such wonderful customer service!

I am so impressed that I don’t even have the words to describe it!

Also, the men who live in this country are all handsome! No matter where you look, there are handsome men everywhere!

I have to be careful not to accidentally fall in love with them, so I’m really having a hard time! Ufufu.

In any case, I really enjoyed the few days I spent in that country.

It was really a great experience.

I will probably never come across such a wonderful country ever again!

○

“.....”

Cafes usually have a newspaper stand near the reception, and I make it a point to read through all of them in order.

You can never have too much information, and it is interesting because depending on the newspaper, they may take different stances on the same issue, and sometimes you even see a completely opposite opinion. What’s more, they are a perfect way to pass the time until my coffee arrives.

Depending on the country, you might find newspapers from other nearby countries as well.

“.....”

I just happened to be in one such country that day, and there was a newspaper from a nearby country—one I had visited only a few days ago.



Of course, I read it.

“.....What the heck.”

I was completely dumbfounded.

Or, more accurately, it made my blood boil.

My anger reached the maximum level. I gripped the newspaper so hard that it crumpled. My expression must have become quite fierce as well. The waitress who bought my coffee said, “Thank you for waiting, here’s your coffee... Hiii!” and let out a scream.

“Aah, I’m sorry. Thank you.”

I put paper aside for now, and took a deep breath.

“Ah, that’s okay... is there something about the newspaper that upset you?”

The waitress put my coffee on the table while looking at the expression on my face.

“I’ve visited this country once before.”

“Oh, that country? Haha, I understand.”

The waitress looked like she was convinced of something as she held the platter with both hands and nodded.

“Were you also one of the people who took a survey when you were leaving that country?”

Hmm?

“What do you mean, one of the people?”

She’s right, I do remember filling out a survey.

Actually, we’re using the opinions of people from other countries as material for our

newspaper articles—they even promoted the survey like that.

“I went on a trip to that country once before... A few days later, after I came back here, I saw a similar article in the newspaper filled with lies.”

“.....”

I see, so that country publishes fictitious articles in their newspaper on a daily basis.

I can't trust them at all. A newspaper that can't be trusted is not worth reading. It would be far more useful to just dump it into the fireplace.

“Until very recently, that country didn't allow foreigners inside. That's why I was curious about it and went to see—it's only natural to feel curious about how popular other places are. Although I wrote [I didn't see anything particularly novel] in the survey, it was altered to read that I had said [It was a wonderful country!] instead.”

“Haah? You want to order? Write the order slip yourself! What, you have a problem with that? You pig!”

I heard someone shouting that from the other side of the restaurant.

After glancing in that direction, the girl in front of me slumped her shoulders and said,

“.....Even if we took that kind of attitude, I'm sure it would be twisted around in that country to say something else.”

“.....”

After looking at the expression on the face of the angry waitress on the other side of the restaurant, I pulled my tricorne lower to cover my face and asked,

“But what do they gain by modifying the opinions in that way?”

“Who knows? I don't have the answer to that.”

“Fumu...”

“By the way, there's something else I've heard about that place—”

The waitress spoke.

“I’ve heard that even though the gates of the country are now open, not a single citizen of that country has ever set foot outside.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Maybe because they believe that their country is better than anywhere else?”

“.....”

They don’t want to leave their country. They lack the courage to go outside.

In order to gloss over those feelings, perhaps the people of that country had taken to falsifying the articles in their newspapers to try and make their own country more attractive.

If they were already living in a wonderful country, there was no need to go outside—that’s probably what they thought.

“By the way, have there been any people who took up residence in that country?”

Hearing my question, the waitress laughed as if the answer was obvious.

“Of course not. At least, as far as I know.”

# Chapter 4

## The Grape-stomping Girl

Two neighboring villages celebrate a joint harvest festival, and this is the tenth year since they began.

I heard that they used to quarrel, resent each other, and fight over pointless things before, but now there is no trace of that.

To the children who were born there in the last ten years, it was as if the two neighboring villages were actually one large village.

“Hey, Grandpa, is our village really on good terms with the other village?”

However, one young boy was somewhat skeptical about the situation of the two villages—or one big village—that seemed to get along so well.

It was no surprise he felt that way. After all, the harvest festival that was being celebrated today felt like an event designed to tear the two villages apart.

There were old people who carried over wooden crates full of grapes, set them down in the middle of the road, and massaged their waists.

“Are you curious about why we carry out this festival?”

“Yeah.”

“Hohoho... It’s to maintain the relationship between the two villages.”

“Eeeh? But...”

The boy looked at the contents of the crates. The grapes that had just been picked that morning were shining like jewels in the light of the sun.

There were a large number of similar crates—so many that it wasn’t possible to count



them all—sitting on the narrow and short road that separated the two villages.

There were crates being brought there by both villages.

This was the main event of the harvest festival.

After preparing the crates packed full of grapes, the villagers would throw them at each other and become covered in grape juice—it was the kind of event that just seemed like a waste of perfectly good grapes.

At face value, it appeared to be a festival where people prayed *Let us have a plentiful harvest so that we can afford to be covered in grape juice*, but the people who participated in the festival were quite savage.

For example, last year there were cases where men from the other village, rejected by girls from this village, took revenge by covering them in grape juice from head to toe. Even married couples from the same village unleashed their bottled-up dissatisfaction by shouting insults and complaints at each other while rubbing grapes into each others' faces.

The people, who usually lived comfortably with each other, for some reason changed completely on this one day and behaved like they were possessed by demons.

There was even a feeling that the two villages would split apart by the next day.

Surprisingly, however, apart from the road covered in grape pulp, everything went back to normal the day after the festival.

Perhaps the festival acted as a pressure valve that let people blow off steam at regular intervals.

Even the boy understood that very well.

However, that was why he was still skeptical.

If the villages really were on good terms, they would not need to hold such a festival.

“Your thinking is correct. Our village is most certainly not on good terms with the other village. Not only do I think they’re annoying, I also consider all the people of that

village to be my enemies.”

“Then why are we holding such a festival?”

“We’re holding it precisely for that reason. We clear away the grudges by throwing grapes at each other. The two villages are certainly not on good terms. However, we just found a day on which we could be honest with our feelings. On that day, ten years ago.”

“Hmm...”

“Oh, I’ve never told you about what happened ten years ago, right? Do you want to know?”

“Yeah! Tell me! Tell me!”

The old man looked into the faraway sky. He could see birds flying through the sky without a sound, and that view was unchanging, no different from what he had seen ten years ago.

“On that day, ten years ago—a traveler came to our village.”

“Hoho?”

Ah, this was definitely going to turn into a long-winded tale. The boy realized that in an instant.

He also wished that his grandfather had waited until they went back home, if he wanted to tell such a long-winded tale.

“That traveler was a witch with ash-grey hair that gently hung over her shoulders. She was like an angel but also like the devil.”

“Hmm.”

“In that way, a witch, who are rarely seen around these parts, came to visit our village. That day became an unforgettable day for our village—”

And so the old man spoke of what happened on that day, ten years ago.

The witch, who appeared to be an angel but also looked like the devil should you take a closer look, was on a journey.

Who was she?

Yes, it was me.

“.....”

It was a peaceful country road. The clear blue sky seemed to stretch out infinitely, and the birds appeared to be flying joyfully without making a sound.

The path that ran in between the greenery on either side was brown in color, and led towards two villages that were visible a little way ahead.

I flew on my broom, following the winding road. The gentle breeze that was common here touched me with pleasantly cool fingers every time I accelerated.

Feeling just the right amount of comfort, I took a deep breath and looked ahead.

There were two small, neighboring villages.

These villages that were small and looked inviting were known elsewhere as the two wine-making villages.

“Welcome, Witch-sama! You are really lucky, choosing today of all days to visit us! Please come on in. The chief of our village is delighted to have you as a guest.”

I received a great welcome when I reached one of the villages.

People came out of their houses to get a look at my face, and smiled happily.

I followed my guide and was taken to the village chief, and received a great welcome here too, from an old man who laughed with a “Hohoho.”

“I must say, you’re quite good looking.”

He’s saying I’m cute, right?

“Ah, yes, I know. Thank you.”

I had no idea why he complimented me all of a sudden, so I just forced a smile for now.

Even if you don't know what's going on, you can get through most situations by smiling vaguely. This is the secret to success, and it's what smart people do.

Anyways, getting back to the point.

“This village is famous for its wine, isn't it?”

“Indeed. Wine is the speciality of this village... by the way, you look quite young. Do you like wine?”

“Mhm.”

Actually, I've never drunk wine before. In fact, I only came here because I heard that the wine is very delicious.

It's my first time drinking something which contains alcohol, after all. I'd prefer to drink something delicious.

“The wine made in our village is exquisite, without a doubt. It's incomparably more delicious than the wine produced by that other village! One might even say that our wine was made by the gods themselves!”

“Oh?”

By the way, according to what I was told, “The wines from both villages aren't really all that different. Rather, they're pretty much the same thing.” However, there might be something that only the locals can understand.

“Still, the folks over at yonder village are quite stubborn. They don't want to lose to our village, so they recently started doing that. They're so shameless!”

“Hehee.”

“And this is wine I was talking about!”



The village chief banged a bottle of wine down on the table with a loud sound.

It had a label that read [Even better than the wine made five years ago, which was called the best harvest in all of history]. I'm not really sure whether it's saying the wine is delicious or not.

The name of the wine was [The Wine From Yonder Village]. What kind of name is that?

"By the way, our village is called Hither Village."

Oh, so they're the names of the villages. I see.

However, rather than that useless bit of trivia, I was more interested in what was in the center of the label.

It was a picture of a smiling girl, whose golden hair had a bit of a wave to it.

[I stomp-stomped on the grapes with all my love.]

It had that written in a speech bubble. In addition, it also said [Origin: Yonder Village's grape stomping girl, Rosemary-chan].

".....What the heck is this?"

When I said that, the village chief banged the table with his fist. So noisy.

"This is what I was talking about! Yonder Village was unable to win against us, so they resorted to this desperate strategy! Look! Look at Rosemary-chan on the label! The other village has set up Rosemary-chan as the origin!"

"Shouldn't it be 'manufacturer' instead of 'origin?'"

"Writing it as 'origin' works better to arouse the buyers."

"....." Arouse, huh?

"In any case, Yonder Village is steadily increasing their sales of wine by selling such an item that incites fetishism!"

“Hehee.”

This sells? Something like this actually sells?

“Hither village is in a serious predicament because of this. It’s a very big problem!”

“They’re just changing the label, though, right? Is it actually delicious?”

“.....Y-You’ve never drunk it, so you wouldn’t understand.”

Oh look, you’re getting flustered. You drank it, didn’t you?

Wait, that bottle is empty. Did you drink it all?

Looking at my judgemental stare, the village chief averted his gaze.

“Wine made from a cute girl’s stomp-stomping is delicious as expected...”

“By the way, what does this ‘stomp-stomp’ mean?”

“In our villages, the girls use that term to refer to pulping the grapes with their feet.”

“Haa.”

Why use such a strange term for something like that?

“Then why don’t you compete by having a cute girl stomp-stomp for you as well?”

As usual, I gave some random and vague advice. I just wanted to end the conversation that appeared to be going nowhere. Truly, this is the smart people’s secret to success. Yes indeed.

“Well said!”

However.

The village chief banged both his hands down on the table and leaned forwards.

“You’re exactly right! If we get a good looking girl to stomp-stomp for us, we can win!”

“Y-Yes.....”

“And so, without further ado! Please help us out.”

“.....Mu mu?”

“A good looking girl like you should do just fine, right?”

“.....Mu mu mu?”

“Actually, just do it. This is something only you can do.”

“.....Mu mu mu mu?”

Oh, what’s this?

Did my secret techniques for success attract trouble instead?

○

“Everyone! Listen up! This Witch-dono here has agreed to be our grape-stomping girl!”

The village chief dashed out of his house and shouted that to the people who were gathered in the village.

As soon as they heard that, the villagers raised both hands into the air and let out three cheers.

.....

No. No no no no no.

“Excuse me, I didn’t say anything of the sort.”

“Everyone! Witch-san is just raring to go!”

No, I'm not. I have absolutely interest in doing that, you know?

"Umm... This is really hard to say, but—"

"Alright people, bring me a big tub and all the grapes you can find! I'm going to make her stomp them until her legs fall off!"

Oh, so you've finally revealed your true nature.

Yeah, I should probably just leave.

I spun around on the spot, picked up my bag, and started walking.

The villagers are running around preparing a tub and other things. They're overflowing with the intent to make me stomp grapes.

I don't care.

I'm just going to ignore them. Thankfully, the villagers seem to be intent on their tasks, so I should be able to sneak away safely. If it comes to it, I can just fly away on my broom to escape.

...Or so I thought while I was walking away.

"Oh my! If it isn't the outdated people from Hither Village. Whatever are you doing? Hmm?"

I did not expect anyone to appear and block my way.

A golden haired girl, who looked vaguely familiar, stood there with an arrogant expression and one hand near her mouth while looking down at the villagers. She had a number of men with particularly good physiques pulling carts behind her, so she gave the impression of a female boss, or a queen of some sort.

"Y-You are... Rosemary-chan!"

"How do you do, Village Chief-san? What are all of you doing?"

"That's none of your business! In fact, I'd like to know what all of you are doing here!"

This is Hither Village!”

It felt like a dangerous situation was developing, but seeing the village chief still clutching the wine bottle with the Rosemary-chan label, I could only think that he was putting up a brave front.

Rosemary-chan turned up her nose at him and spoke.

“We are returning from making a sale of wine. Several carts’ worth of wine, in fact. Haven’t I told you many times before to keep the road clear because we will be using it at this time? What is all this racket about?”

“Why you... Taking me for a fool...!”

“Oh my, what’s that wine bottle you’re holding in your hand?”

The village chief hid the wine bottle immediately.

Looking closely, you could see that it was signed by Rosemary-chan herself. So he must be a fan.

“Also, who’s this midget of a girl? She seems to be cosplaying as a witch.”

How rude.

“Despite how I look, I am a real witch.”

After giving me a glance, Rosemary-chan turned to look at the village chief once again.

“Oh, I see.”

She seemed to have figured something out after seeing the villagers making preparations for grape-stomping—her expression turned unpleasant.

“I see. You can’t win against me, so you planned to use this seedy-looking girl to stomp-stomp the grapes, is that it? Fufufu.”

“Seedy-looking?”

“Her face is average, and her body is like that of a child.”

“Average? Like that of a child?”

“Actually, let me correct myself. You don’t just look like one, you are a child. You can’t win against me even if you get a child like this to stomp-stomp the grapes, you know?”

“.....”

Okay, now I’m mad.

Why do I have to be ridiculed to such an extent by someone I’ve just met?

“Oh well, try your best. I have more grapes to stomp-stomp, so I will take my leave—please move aside, seedy-looking Witch-san.”

“.....”

Hoho. I certainly can’t just back down after being looked down upon so much.

“My name is Elaina. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

I took a step forward and glared at Rosemary-chan’s smirking face.

“Did you not hear me? I asked you to get out of my sight.”

She just said that, without changing her expression at all.

Her expression was triumphant. She seemed to think that she had already won, or that it wouldn’t be much of a fight at all.

.....How annoying.

I suppose I’ll just have to beat her. Completely and utterly.

I got caught up in the situation, and ended up helping the people of Hither Village by working as their grape-stomping girl.

I agreed to help them, but...

“...What’s with the cosplay outfit?”

According to the village chief, the girls who stomp grapes must wear a particular type of outfit.

A wine-red flared skirt, and a similarly wine-red tunic with long sleeves. There are frills on the sleeves, and the whole ensemble looks a lot like a red colored maid uniform.

Why do I have to wear something like this?

According to the village chief, it is more arousing this way. I don’t understand his logic.

“Well, anyways, please start stomp-stomping, Witch-dono.”

“.....”

It was obvious that my long hair would get in the way while stomping the grapes, so I tied it up into a single ponytail at the back of my head and extended my bare feet into the tub.

“By the way, how should I go about stomping the grapes?”

“It’ll be fine as long as you stomp on them thoroughly while putting your love into it.”

“.....”

What should I do if I have no love to put in at all?

“For now, I will stomp on them while remembering my hatred for Rosemary-chan.”

“It’s not ‘stomp!’ It’s ‘stomp-stomp!’”

His words sounded like nonsense, so I ignored him.

“...Ei.”

I pinched the fabric of the skirt with both hands, pulled it up to knee-level, and lowered my feet into the tub.



The pale green grapes that filled the tub transmitted a cool feeling to the soles of my feet. When I put my weight on them, they were immediately crushed and a clear liquid gushed out of them. A concentrated sweet smell rose up from below me. I raised my wet feet like I was going to run, but there was no place to run to, and I once again stepped down on the disgustingly soft grapes. As I kept stepping on them, the crushed skins of the grapes got in between my toes.

Crush the grapes, release the juice, and crush them yet again. The feeling of stepping on the rounded and soft grapes gradually turned into a strange feeling, as if I was walking on wet sand.

It felt a little disgusting, but it was also weirdly addictive. A strange feeling.

To put it concisely, it was very exciting.

“Die... Die... Die... Die...!”

And so, I was slightly motivated.

Seeing me that way, the villagers around me started to take a lot of pictures and let out shouts of joy. I think the curses I was currently muttering were also directed in part at those villagers who were taking pictures of me without permission.

After a while, my legs were completely drenched in grape juice. The villagers continued to crowd around me, and stress levels continued to rise.

During the latter half, I stomped on the grapes after completely shutting away all my emotions.

“.....”

I wonder how difficult it must be for Rosemary-chan, who is forced to do this every day?

Most likely, she is being forced to bear all the expectations of the people from Yonder Village and stomp on the grapes everyday.

.....

Well, her struggles and her attitude towards me are different matters.

○

“.....So tired.”

I was resting in the village chief’s house after stomping the grapes for a while. According to the village chief, he wanted me to stomp on grapes one more time.

He apparently wanted to take this chance to manufacture the wine in bulk.

“You’ve done a fine job, Witch-dono. Here, take a look. We will be using this kind of bottle to hold the wine that you have helped make.”

The village chief put down a bottle in front of me.

[The best wine from Hither Village]  
[Made with my feelings of hatred and irritation]  
[Origin: The Witch of Ashes, Elaina-san]

Along with that text, the label on the bottle had a picture of me stomping on the grapes with a smile steeped in darkness.



“.....Will this really sell?”

I don't think anyone will buy this.

“The people from Hither Village have decided to take a different approach from Yonder Village. If they want to use Rosemary-chan's beauty as a selling point, we've decided to get rid of that factor altogether and use a different strategy to make our sales.”

“.....”

“It will probably be a big hit among the people with those kinds of tastes.”

“Do the people who buy wine all have such an interest in sexual things?”

“Well, considering how well Rosemary-chan's wine is selling, you might have a point.”

“.....”

What is so great about getting drunk on wine made from something a girl has stomped on? I don't understand it at all.

I felt a headache coming on. That's enough of this topic.

“By the way, how much wine can be made with that amount from earlier?”

“Let's see... About half a cask, would be my best guess.”

“Eeh. That's all?”

I thought I stomped on quite a lot of grapes.

“And that's why I want you to stomp on enough for the remaining half as well.”

Hearing the truth just makes me lose my motivation even more.

However, if I run away now,

[Oh, my! As I thought, she ran away! Of course she did, the work of a grape-stomping girl isn't so easy that even a newcomer can keep it up for long!]

I get the feeling that she'd make fun of me again by saying something like that.

Umumu.

.....

"...Hmm?"

At this point, I suddenly realized something.

"Umm, that bottle you're holding so dearly—how well does it sell?"

"It sells quite well. It's so popular that all the wine being sold by Yonder Village belongs to Rosemary-chan."

"All of it, you say.....?"

Does that mean she's stomping on grapes every day from morning till dusk?

.....

Hang on.

If that's the case, then something doesn't add up.

Actually, a lot of things don't add up.

"....."

After thinking about it for a while, I started to talk.

"Village Chief-san. How much longer until we get back to work?"

After that, I left the village chief's house and ran towards Yonder Village. I kept the grape-stomping outfit on, but wore my shoes.

There were many things that I felt were strange about this situation.

It was such an obvious ploy, I seriously wondered why nobody from Hither Village had

realized it.

I followed the cart tracks on the path until I reached Yonder Village, and then ran inside.

One of the points that I'm curious about are these wheels.

It looked like Rosemary-chan was leading a number of men and personally selling the wine to the customers, but would a girl who is tasked with stomping grapes really work to sell the wine as well?

If all the wine being sold by Yonder Village is supposed to come from Rosemary-chan's efforts, that makes it even more suspicious.

How many grapes would she need to stomp on in order to significantly improve the income of an entire village? How much time would she need to spend on that?

If she was really spending that much time and effort to stomp grapes, would she have enough spare time to help with selling the wine?

Actually, isn't it just plain impossible for one person to be responsible for manufacturing all the wine?

“.....”

In other words, putting it simply.

“Fufufu... Alright you trash, keep working for my sake! You want to sell the wine with my label, don't you? Well, answer me!”

Following the cart tracks, I reached a building that looked like a factory.

There was a tough-looking man guarding the entrance, so I put him to sleep with magic and slightly opened the door.

The voice that was leaking outside the building apparently belonged to Rosemary-chan. She had her arms crossed, and was swilling some wine about in a wine glass while relaxing on a chair.

It was pretty much just as I had imagined.

“.....As I thought.”

She was not a grape-stomping girl. She was not stomping on any grapes.

In that case, who was working to manufacture the wine?

[Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Right!]

The answer was simple. It was evident with just a glance.

The tough-looking men who pulled her carts were, in local parlance, stomp-stomping the grapes. Wine made from the efforts of sweaty men crushing the grapes—this was the true nature of Rosemary-chan’s mass-produced wine.

In other words, she was lying about the manufacturing method.

This is already enough reason for a lawsuit.

○

“No, that’s wrong! It was only today! I just happened to not feel like doing it today! On other days, I work from morning till dusk stomp-stomping the grapes!”

After tying up all the people there with rope on the spot, I dragged them over to the road that ran in between Yonder Village and Hither Village.

The people from Hither Village seemed to have realized something after seeing her and her helpers trussed up, so they gathered around while still holding the grapes they had prepared for grape-stomping. The people from Yonder Village also seemed to have arrived at some sort of conclusion from that sight, and they too assembled around the area while bringing their own grapes, albeit while fidgeting slightly.

Apparently, the people from Yonder Village knew that Rosemary-chan’s wine was just the product of the efforts of sweaty men.

“Crap... they finally found out about it?”



“Kuuh... It was such a good business too...”

“Hey, what do we do about this?”

Their voices were clearly audible to me.

I gave small cough to clear my throat, gently swayed the wine glass that I had plundered from Rosemary-chan, and sighed at the sweet smell that rose from it.

“You know, Rosemary-san, you can hardly expect us to believe that you alone were responsible for all the wine made in Yonder Village. The amount of wine made clearly doesn’t add up, and you most certainly wouldn’t have had the time to help with sales as well.”

“.....Umm, that is... I mean...”

Rosemary-chan became flustered.

“Actually, Rosemary-san, how can you bear to drink the wine that you forced men to make for you? Don’t you feel any guilt or discomfort?”

“Ah, that’s not a problem. That wine was made from grapes that I stomp-stomped a long time ago.”

“That wine? A long time ago?”

“.....Oops.”

“.....”

Is she really that dumb?

I took a sip of the wine that I held in my hand.

“What is the meaning of this!? Is this what I think? Rosemary-chan’s wine was actually made from grapes stomp-stomped by those sweaty men over there!?”

The village chief from Hither Village was almost frothing at the mouth from rage. The other villagers also started to make a ruckus a few moments later. The agitation slowly

began to spread through the crowd comprised of people from Hither Village.

“.....Tch. Why does it matter if I lied about the manufacturing method? These men are so annoying.”

Rosemary-chan muttered those words.

“Hey, I heard that! How dare you make fools of us, you little girl!”

“...Hmph. I know that you’re actually my fan.”

“That’s a different matter! In the first place, I only bought wine from Yonder Village because I thought that you had stomp-stomped the grapes for it!”

“How disgusting.”

I had to agree with her.

However, the village chief from Hither Village didn’t seem to agree, and his face went red as though he was drunk.

“It’s not disgusting! Don’t mess with me, you brat!”

Saying that, he grabbed some grapes from a person who was standing close by, and threw them at her.

Most of the grapes that were sent flying scored a direct hit on Rosemary-chan. The ones that missed her hit the tough-looking men, and myself as well, releasing their juice.

“.....Haa?”

Why do I have to share in the damage as well?

Seeing Rosemary-chan drenched in grape juice, the people from Yonder Village got angry as well.

“You bastard! What do you think you’re doing to our Rosemary-chan!?”

“Go to hell, damn geezer!”

“Die!!”

The people of Yonder Village imitated the village chief, and started throwing grapes at the people from Hither Village.

After that, the situation devolved into something that was hard to even look at. The people of Hither Village and Yonder Village began throwing grapes at each other, with Rosemary-chan, the tough-looking men, and myself caught in between.

I’m sure they had intended to throw the grapes at people from the other village.

However, being caught in between, we were hit by a lot of the grapes that missed their mark and were soon drenched in grape juice.

“.....”

Why do I have to get mixed up in this as well?

I took another sip of the wine. It was delicious.

“.....What are you going to do about this?”

“.....”

We were gradually covered in grape juice from head to toe.

My irritation mounted each time I was hit, and eventually, I stopped caring altogether. The blood rushed to my head, and before I realized it, I had my staff out.

I feel a little hot, maybe I’m drunk as well.

“Fufu. Ufufu. Seriously... You’re all making fun of me, aren’t you?”

Saying that, I waved my staff.

I used my magic to catch the grapes that came flying towards me, and used all my power to send them flying back at high speed in the direction that they had come from.

While taking sips of the wine, I ensured that people from both villages were entirely covered in grape juice.

The grapes that I was reflecting were basically moving like bullets at this point.

“Haha! Ahahahahaha! Hahahahaha!”

By the way, who was this girl who was relentlessly attacking the villagers while laughing like a demon?

That’s right, it’s me.

In any case.

I’ve been told that something like that happened to me in that village, but I don’t remember it at all.

However, it’s true that there was such an incident.

When I woke up with a pounding headache, I saw that I was underneath a sky that was far too dazzling, with the people of both villages strewn about and covered in grape juice, and Rosemary-chan in tears saying “I’m sorry, I won’t do it again.”

After talking to the fearful girl, I learned what had happened to me. In fact, my memories from when I had taken her out of the factory were absent, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up under the blue sky. However, looking at the scene around me, I could tell that people had indeed been throwing grapes at each other.

“.....Uuu. My head hurts. I feel like it’s going to break.”

I stood up while holding my head and walked unsteadily towards the village chief’s house.

There’s no way that I can stomp grapes while experiencing so much pain. Actually, all the villagers are collapsed and covered in grape juice, so there’s no reason for me to stomp on any grapes in the first place. Rather, there are no grapes left to stomp on. They’ve all been crushed, and are strewn over the ground.

Most of the people here are unconscious, except for a few like Rosemary-chan. I should use this opportunity to escape.

.....

Maybe I caused the situation to take such a turn because I was tired of stomping grapes, but I can't really remember because of my headache.

Well, I should just be glad that things turned out for the better without me having to do anything annoying.

"...My head hurts."

I changed my clothes at the village chief's house and flew away on my broom while still smelling of grapes.

My first experience with drinking alcohol just left me with a horrible headache and uncertain memories.



"—After that incident, both villages started the practice of throwing grapes at around this time."

"Eh. Sorry Grandpa, I don't really understand how that story led to this."

The old man gave a simple explanation to the boy who struggled to understand.

"The throwing of grapes was more fun than we had thought, so we decided to do it every year right after the harvest to release our stress. I'm not really sure why, but after we started doing that our harvests became more plentiful, and the efficiency of our work increased as well."

"I see."

After nodding several times the boy tilted his head.

"Ah, by the way. The Rosemary-chan who you talked about in your story, is she..."

"That's right. It's the same Rosemary-chan who works as a grape-stomping girl in Yonder Village. After that incident, she apparently started working properly. That's a

good thing.”

“So she still stomps grapes?”

“Indeed.”

“She’s past thirty now, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she has ripened very well.”

“.....”

The boy was unable to hold back his tears after considering the bitter things Rosemary-chan had gone through.

“In any case, the annual event carried out by our villages is now finally at its tenth year.”

After nodding, the boy asked,

“By the way, Grandpa. What’s that wine bottle you’re holding?”

It was a different bottle from the one his Grandpa had mentioned in his story.

It had a label with the words [The best wine from Hither Village], [Made with my feelings of hatred and irritation], [Origin: The Witch of Ashes, Elaina-san] printed on it, along with a picture of a girl stomping on grapes with a smile steeped in darkness.

“Oh this? This is it—the wine made by the witch-san I just told you about.”

“You didn’t drink it?”

“No, it would be a waste to do that.”

A cute exterior, with an unspeakably evil smile. And since it has a picture of her actually stomping the grapes, there are people who will buy it in spite of the ridiculously high price.

In the end, the Witch of Ashes’ wine that was marketed as a super high quality product

was sold out in no time at all.

Seeing as it was a rare opportunity, the village chief secretly bought one for himself. It is said that the village chief is still carrying it around carefully without drinking it. He was even saying something about making it a heirloom.

By the way.

About that wine that sold out in no time.

As it was a legendary product of which only a few bottles were ever sold, it is said that they are still being traded amongst hardcore fans for a high price.



# Chapter 5

## A Tale of Items:

### The Cunning Master and Intelligent Disciple

I'm Elaina! An apprentice witch, Elaina!

Right now, I'm living with my master, Fran-sensei, and gathering the experience I need in order to become a witch!

My master bears the title of Witch of Stardust, and is apparently a very great person! Her long hair that is as black as midnight shimmers beautifully in the light, and as you would guess from the gentle look in her eyes, she is very kind when she teaches me about magic! Most people with an amiable personality are powerless or good for nothing, but that's not true for my master. She is so flawless that she can be called a perfect person who is unimpeachable in every way.

Of course, as someone who is being taught by such a master, it's only natural that I am a perfect person as well!

I'm just joking, by the way.

Especially about the description of my master.

"....."

I suppose I should stop being in strangely high spirits, and just tell the truth with a straight face.

It truth, this person who is my master is always playing hooky and kidding around, and even today,

"Elaina, what are you doing? Eh? You're developing a new magic? Wow. That's amazing. You're so studious."

She said that with a surprised expression, and when I thought she was going to give me some advice,

“Well, do your best~”

She just said that and started reading a book.

Back when I first started my tutelage, I was confused by her easygoing attitude and thought things like,

“Ah, she’s testing how independent I can be? I’ll do my best!”

I was fired up in as such, but it turned out that she was only instructing me in magic because my parents had asked her to do so.

After that fact came to light, there were times when she would say things like,

“Elaina, let me oversee your training.”

And teach me about magic like it was only natural. However, there were also times when she would say things like,

“Elaina, let me oversee— Oh look, a butterfly... Ufufu...”

And go missing for a while, and even,

“Elaina. I’m hungry.”

Irritate me often in such a manner.

In short, to put it positively, my master was a carefree person. To put it negatively, she didn’t think anything through.

“By the way, what kind of potion are you making?”

For better or for worse, she was capricious.

Fran-sensei suddenly appeared beside me and gazed at the various research materials on the table as well as the blue-colored potion that was contained in a small bottle.

“.....”

I am always being led around in circles by this capricious woman.

“This is a potion that gives [Life to Items]. I was just mixing some stuff together and happened to make it.”

“Giving life to items...? What kind of effects does it have?”

“If you pour the liquid in this bottle over an item, you will be able to have a conversation with it. By the way, I’ve already tested it.”

For example, when I used it on a pen, it cried out,

“Thank you for always holding on to me! Ufufu.”

And when I used it on a washrag,

“Allow me to let you in on a little secret. I’m not really a washrag, I’m actually a towel. Oh, I have become dirty...”

I came to learn that unexpected fact.

By the way, when I used it on the scrubbing brush,

“I, the scrubbing brush, have become dirty...”

It just whispered that back to me.

You get the idea.

I had managed to successfully make such a potion that would let people communicate with items.

I just made it by accident.

However, it was the kind of thing that would unexpectedly sell for a high price.

“.....That’s amazing.”

After staying silent for a little while, Sensei continued to speak.

“By the way, Elaina, I’ve heard that there is a nearby village whose residents are troubled because they are unable to communicate with items.”

She brought up a strange topic.

“Oh?”

That’s an oddly specific trouble to have.

Why would not being able to communicate with items cause trouble to anyone? I should certainly like to meet with these people and ask for more details.

“By the way, if you let them talk to the items, they’ll bake bread for you.”

“Eeh.”

Well, that certainly sounds very suspicious.

“So, Elaina, won’t you lend me that potion for the day?”

“What are you going to do if I lend it to you?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I’m going to go and procure some top quality bread.”

“.....”

My suspicion reached such a level that it caused me to frown.

“In that case, tell me where the village is. I’ll go there myself and get the bread.”

“Oh, you can’t do that. The people of that village don’t trust anyone except me.”

“Eh? There are people apart from me who trust you?”

“That’s mean.”

No, it's not mean at all.

It's been almost a year since I met Sensei, so I had a pretty good idea as to what she wanted to do.

No doubt she wanted to sell my potion for a high price in a nearby village, and use those funds to buy bread.

A cunning plan, indeed.

"Just leave it to me, Elaina. I'm sure that I will be able to get a lot of tasty bread."

"....."

Well, even though I knew what her intentions were, I didn't particularly feel like reproaching her, and neither did I feel like flat out rejecting her request.

Doing that would just cause more problems, and despite the circumstances, it didn't change the fact that Fran-sensei was making an effort to go to the neighboring village to get bread for me.

For someone as carefree and capricious as her, this was an exceedingly rare offer.

".....Here you go."

For that reason, I entrusted the small bottle with the blue colored liquid to Sensei.

○

And then, later that evening.

"I'm back, Elaina."

Fran-sensei came back home.

"Ah. Welcome... back...?"

For some reason, Fran-sensei was carrying only a single loaf of bread. What's more, it was a loaf of plain bread. And it was completely cold. It didn't look tasty at all.

I had been looking forward to eating tasty bread, just what had caused such a turn of events?

“My apologies, Elaina. Due to various reasons, this is all I could get. By the way, I used up most of the potion.”

That’s what she said.

“.....Ehhh.”

I received the small bottle from Fran-sensei.

As she said, it was almost empty. There was just enough potion left to stain the bottom of the small bottle.

However, what Sensei said is pretty suspicious. Looking closer, I can see bread crumbs clinging to the corners of her mouth. Her whole body smells of bread. It’s so suspicious that I feel like punishing her.

“Hey now, Elaina. Are you doubting me, perchance? I’m not lying, you know? I’m telling the truth, this was all the bread that I could get.”

“What are these various reasons you speak of?”

“Due to various reasons, I cannot tell you.”

“How did you manage to use up so much of the potion?”

“Due to various reasons, I cannot tell you that either.”

This ‘various reasons’ excuse is indeed convenient.

But still, it’s so easy to tell when someone is lying. It looks like my master and I are birds of the same feather.

The kind of lies we tell are almost exactly the same.

Is it because we’ve spent so much time together?

“.....”

Well, putting that matter aside for now.

I was already aware that Fran-sensei was similar to me when I had handed over the potion bottle to her.

Also, I’m not foolish enough to not come up with a plan for dealing with this obvious outcome.

And so, I decided to spring the trap that I had set up in advance.

While swirling around what was left of the potion in the small bottle.

“Bottle-san, Bottle-san. Can you tell me what exactly Fran-sensei was doing during the time I wasn’t watching?”

The bottle replied to my question.

[Yes Ma’am. This witch went to a neighboring village and traded the potion that was inside me for a large amount of bread. And then, on the way back she said “Eating one piece can’t hurt,” and proceeded to eat more than ten of them all by herself.]

“Seriously?”

[Indeed. This woman is unbelievable.]

I nodded an affirmative.

Even the small bottle was an item.

Since I poured the potion into it, it was able to talk. That’s how the potion works, after all.

Now then.

“Sensei, is there something you want to say to me?”



However, Fran-sensei was just avoiding eye contact with sweat beading on her forehead, and didn't say anything at all. She was as mute as a regular item.

Maybe she'll say something if I use some of this magic potion on her?

# Chapter 6

## Sweets and the Newbie Traveler

The sounds of a trumpet and accordion rang out in the plaza in the middle of a noisy town.

There was nothing elegant about that sound. It was fragmented, and sounded like someone was screaming. You could even say that it was just noise layered on top of even more noise.

Following the sounds to their source on the other side of the main street, where people had gathered to do their shopping, I found a street performer who was greeting passersby with a fake smile on his face, and he would occasionally revert to a serious expression while gazing into the instrument case that lay at his feet.

The empty instrument case that waited with an open mouth had only a few coins inside.

“.....Fuaah.”

I let out a yawn while sitting down on a bench.

The scene of this road lined with white-painted buildings was so beautiful that it was entertaining to just stay for a while and look at the environs. The shrill music and noise did not match the milieu, but oh well.

To begin with, this country was apparently a place where more than half the population was comprised of a wealthy, privileged class, and apart from this plaza, most of the other places I saw had a calm atmosphere. In fact, the sight of soldiers boldly patrolling the streets in groups gave a sense of opulence, rather than security, and apart from this one street corner, the rest of the areas had a soothing atmosphere.

So why was only this plaza so noisy, you ask? That's because people who came in from outside the country were gathered here.

This country is commonly known as the country of sweets. In fact, even this plaza is full of shops that live up to that name and specialize in selling sweets such as macarons, chocolates, and waffles.

The sweets from this country are apparently quite popular elsewhere as well, as evidenced by the merchants, travelers, and tourists who gathered here from other countries to buy them.

Some of them will resell them elsewhere. Others are buying them for themselves.

“.....Fufufufu.”

There’s a bag full of sweets beside me on the bench. I used up most of the money I had on hand to buy as many as I could.

They were insanely expensive, perhaps because they were made with the intention of selling to foreigners, though they did have an excellent reputation. They look as delicious as their price would suggest. I’ve heard that these sweets were made using liberal amounts of expensive ingredients and they were delicious enough to make your cheeks melt. Going by the old axiom of [I paid a lot of money for this, so it is obviously going to be delicious,] I can only hope that it wasn’t just bragging.

“Hello there, Miss! Oh look, your shoes are dirty! How about letting me clean them?”

“.....”

A place where a large number of outsiders gather is a breeding ground for weird people like this who are looking to earn some small change.

However, there is no reason to worry. Such people usually leave without another word if you show them a (spare) empty purse.

“I’m sorry.”

If you add on that simple phrase, this method is exceptionally effective.

“.....Tch.”

By the way, even after I take the effort to do all of this, there are occasionally rude

people who click their tongues at me. I wish they would just turn to ash.

“.....”

Even though this town is filled with people from high society, I guess there are still quite a few people here who can't afford a decent meal.

It looks like there is a wide disparity in wealth of the citizens.

Weaving through the noisy street, I saw children who were walking around and selling fruits that lacked lustre. They wore tattered clothes, and had a sign around their necks that said [Ultra special fruit. One gold coin per fruit.]

The boy who offered to clean my shoes is there as well. Although he doesn't appear to be old enough to work yet.

I also saw the street performer who was playing broken music. The instrument is in such bad shape that it can't even produce a proper tone.

Just as this location is a place of business for foreigners, it is also a place of business for the poor people of this country.

“.....”

However, most of the foreigners didn't spare so much as a glance for them. I could see people looking annoyed while brushing aside the hands of the poor people. It's like they had completely ceased to exist in their field of vision.

Although it seemed cold-hearted, most people were like that.

Most of the foreigners who were used to wandering from place to place did not show any interest in such pitiful people.

“.....Mumu.”

That's why it's easy to tell when someone is a newbie traveler.

“Kyaa~! Such wonderful music! This broken melody is especially amazing! It moves my heart more than any other music that exists in the world! We are so impressed!”

There was a young girl who was dropping gold coins from her purse while dancing happily in front of the aforementioned street performer. She had golden hair, was dressed in a very flashy set of gothic-style clothes, had a brown rucksack on her back, and a beret on her head. She was also a weird girl who referred to herself as “We.”

It was apparent that she was newbie traveler, as she went around doing all the things typical of a newbie traveler.

For starters, she never failed to pay a street performer.

Apparently, the newbie had some notion that she had to pay for every bit of music that reached her ears, regardless of what kind of music it was. I used to be like that in the past as well.

“Oh my! That girl is working despite being so young... how admirable! It’s one gold coin for a fruit, yes? We will take the lot.”

Every time she saw a pitiful child selling fruit, she would buy from them.

Apparently, when faced with a pitiful child, the newbie’s sense of the value of objects underwent a dramatic change, and after causing a deflationary spiral, it could be said that her purse strings did not just loosen, but disappeared altogether. I used to be like that in the past as well.

“Eh? Shoe cleaning? Oh my! We were just thinking that our shoes were dirty!”

Of course, she had her shoes cleaned when they had no need for cleaning.

The excitement of visiting a new country tricked her into thinking that even unnecessary things were necessary. I used to be like that in the past as well.

In this manner, the newbie traveler’s money started to disappear without her realizing. Once a person’s sense of values has been skewed, it won’t return to normal until they hit rock bottom.

Incidentally, the girl hit rock bottom pretty quickly.

“Oh? There’s no money left. I’m sure we had quite a few gold coins until just a while

ago.”

However, the girl looked fairly unfazed despite hitting rock bottom.

“Oh well, that can’t be helped. We suppose we will just go around tasting sweets—ah, you there, in the shop. Give us one of everything, and we mean everything.”

The salesperson in the shop looked surprised at her bold manner of speech and request, but he did as she asked and went about packing the merchandise.

By the way, the salesperson had said “That’ll be ten gold coins.” I heard it loud and clear. That was a ridiculously high price.

“Thank you. Here you go.”

The bold girl handed over ten fruits to the salesperson like it was only natural.

The salesperson was very surprised. He looked like he wanted to say “What is this person thinking?”

“Do you not understand? We bought these earlier for ten gold coins. That means they are worth ten gold coins, correct? So please trade us the sweets for them.”

“.....”

The salesperson was flabbergasted for a while. And then, eventually,

“This is baaaaad! That wicked woman we’ve heard about has finally appeared! Everyone, help me catch her!”

He shouted that.

On hearing that, the music stopped playing and people stopped talking. In the next instant, middle-aged men dressed as cooks came running out of all the shops in the vicinity and pounced on the girl.

“Eh? Eeh? What is this? Stop this, at once!”

The girl was captured easily.

She was held down by the men and had her cheek pressed against the pavement.

“So you’re that wicked woman we heard about!”

“I heard that you’ve been going around laying waste to our shops with your evil ways!”

“Do you take us for fools!?”

“We won’t give in to your threats!”

“Hehehe... you’ve quite a nice body, Miss...”

“Should we make you use your body to pay for insulting us!? Hehehe.....”

“Hehe...”

“Hihhi...”

What’s this?

It looks like things are taking a turn for the worse.

“What are you people doing? We were just trying to purchase some sweets!”

“Shut up!”

A salesperson who came running from another shop looked down at her with a hard expression.

“I know that you’re the one who has been using despicable methods for the past few days to lay waste to our shops! So you’re trying to trade cheap fruit for our wares this time? We won’t let that happen! You are going to be executed!”

“Executed? Oh my! What are you going to do?”

“Hehehe... Do you really have to ask...?”

The men’s eyes were glued to her chest.

The girl followed their gazes, realized that the men were staring, and finally seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

The girl shouted while her face turned bright red.

“So that’s it! You people intend to play a lewd prank on us, is that right? Right here and now!?”

“Eh, right now? Nonononono.”

“Of course we won’t do anything in a place like this, that’s only common sense.”

“Even we wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Stop this at once! We are not the type of woman who is good at such things!”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

“What is this girl talking about?”

“Oh I see, she must be an idiot or something.”

The atmosphere crumbled a bit, but there was no change in the girl’s predicament.

After being restrained by the men, the girl was securely wrapped in a length of rope

It felt like if things were allowed to continue, she would be taken to one of the nearby shops and assaulted by the men.

“.....”

No, I can’t just let this go.

I stood up from my spot, took a bite out of a yellow macaron, then threw the whole thing into my mouth, and went to stand in the way of the men.

“Hello, everyone. Is something the matter?”



I said that while chewing on the macaron.

One of the men looked at me strangely and said,

“Who are you, are you a traveler?”

I nodded, and,

“Yes, I’m a traveling witch. I’ve been watching the situation for a while from the bench over there... Did this girl cause some sort of scandal?”

“That’s right. She’s a wicked woman who has been laying waste to the shops in this area for the past few days.”

“Ho?”

“We’ve heard the rumors. The wicked woman does not pay a single coin, and instead tries to trade some random fruit or something for our sweets.”

“Hoho. And so you captured the girl who tried to exchange fruit for sweets?”

Seeing me agree with the men, the golden-haired girl shouted,

“It’s some sort of mistake! We merely attempted to trade fruit that we purchased for ten gold coins!”

Well, she’s not wrong.

“I saw the whole thing. This girl is just a fool who purchased the fruit from a child for an exorbitant price, and then thought that she could exchange the fruit for sweets. She is not a wicked woman, nor does she seem intelligent enough to carry out any evil deeds.”

“...Hey, that’s uncalled for.”

“Actually, all of you said that you heard rumors about a wicked woman, but didn’t you hear anything about what she looks like?”

I ignored the girl who butted into the conversation and asked that question to the men.

Hearing that, the men ground their teeth and started to discuss it amongst themselves.

“That’s right, I feel like the wicked woman who came to my shop the other day was a little younger...”

“She wasn’t golden-haired.”

“Did she have black hair?”

“I don’t remember her breasts being quite so large.”

“I feel like she was more composed as well...”

I see, I see.

“So it’s clear that she’s not the one you’re looking for, isn’t it? Now, let her go. If you don’t, I’m going to shout for help.”

Actually, there was no need to shout for help; a lot of people had already gathered around. We were in the plaza where a lot of people ordinarily gathered, at a time when there was a lot of pedestrian traffic. Our dispute had gathered a lot of attention, and everyone heard our discussion as well.

From the perspective of the surrounding people who didn’t know the circumstances, it must have looked like a bunch of men who were trying to unfairly capture a woman and do something unspeakable to her, and a witch who had appeared to stop them. The foreign merchants, the high class people who had gathered in the plaza to buy sweets, and the tourists were all looking at the men with cold gazes.

“.....Guh.”

The men faltered.

Not only that, they must have understood that there was absolutely no way for them to turn this situation around. They removed the ropes restraining the girl and said,

“.....Well, you know. Next time, use money to purchase something instead of fruit. Do you understand?”

They started acting like reasonable people, hurriedly pushed their way through the crowd, and returned to their respective shops.

“.....”

The girl, who had not entirely processed the situation yet, had simply and weakly collapsed to the ground, and was looking up at me.

“Umm... Well... Thank you...?”

“Don’t mention it. What’s your name?”

Seeing me extend my hand out to her, the girl hesitantly took hold of it.

“We are called Sabine.”

“I see. I’m Elaina. The Witch of Ashes, Elaina.”

This might seem like an abrupt change in the topic, but regarding that wicked woman those men were talking about earlier.

Just who was she?

That’s right, it’s me.

○

“Eh? Sorry, we didn’t hear you properly. Can you repeat that?”

Once things were settled, I felt that it would be a waste to just part ways with the girl in that manner. I thought I should at least explain the situation to her, so we were currently sitting opposite to each other and sipping coffee in a cafe located in a corner of a peaceful residential district, a little distance away from the plaza.

Of course, I was paying.

She went through all that because she was mistaken for me, after all. This was the least I could do.

“Like I said earlier, I’m the one that those people are searching for. I am the one who is laying waste to the sweet shops in town. So I’m sorry that you had to go through that because of me.”

To think there would be a girl optimistic enough to try and trade fruit for sweets. It was completely outside my expectations.

Actually, I’ve been giving a small amount of money along with the fruit... but it looks like the rumors mention only the fruit.

“Why would you do something like that... Do you not have the money to buy sweets?”

“I do. However, I didn’t feel the necessity to pay for them, so I didn’t.”

“Oh my! How arrogant!”

“Not at all. If anything, I’m very humble.”

“But you’re cheating people when you buy the sweets, aren’t you? That’s horrible. How can you do something like that without feeling anything?”

Sabine-san was glaring at me.

I looked away from her as if trying to escape that gaze, and,

“Well... Let me just say there are various reasons for that.”

“Oh? And what might those be?”

“You really want to know?”

“We would like to know.”

That suits me just fine.

“By the way, Sabine-san. Do you have some free time now?”

“We are a traveler.”

“Meaning?”

“The only thing we have is free time.”

“Hoho.”

In other words she has a lot of free time and no money.

That makes things even better.

After walking some distance from the cafe and flying along with her on my broom, we passed over the roofs of many houses and eventually reached the back gate of the town.

Unlike the majestic front gate that the high-class people would like, this one had a very plain appearance and was barely wide enough to allow one cart to pass through at a time.

I found this place on my first day here, when I was killing time by flying around the town on my broom.

“Take a look at that.”

Peeking over the roof of one of the houses, we saw a retailer from this country who had been waiting for a cart.

“Hey, I was waiting for you. Thank you for your hard work today as well.”

After a slight bow in greeting, the merchant got down from the cart and started unloading wrapped bundles.

“I’ve brought them today as well. As you can see, they are all items that were acquired under special circumstances. I gave them a quick examination, so I don’t think you’ll have a problem with any of them”

The retailer looked inside one of the bundles.

It was full of things like fruits, butter, sugar, milk, wheat flour, and cacao; namely things that were indispensable for making sweets.

“What is all of this?”

Sabine-san looked puzzled by that sight.

“It’s just like that merchant said. Those commodities were all obtained under special circumstances. For example, being rejected due to issues during manufacture or failing the taste test... what you see here is a collection of such failures. Of course, they are not high-quality products.”

“.....Wait a minute. The people of this country were singing praises about how the sweets are prepared from carefully selected ingredients.”

“In a way, they are using carefully selected ingredients.”

It’s just that they are selecting ingredients with certain issues.

“But the people of this city are famous for making delicious sweets. We only came here because we heard about that.”

“I’ve been going around buying up all the sweets I can find for the past few days, and I’ve occasionally tried eating some of them. They were all exceedingly plain. Would you like to try one?”

I pulled a macaron out of the bag I was holding and handed it over to Sabine-san.

After taking it hesitantly, she took a small bite out of it and carefully chewed it.

“.....”

She had a very complicated expression on her face.

“.....Well, it’s not bad. However, we would not pay gold for something like this.”

“Right?”

At the most, it would be worth one copper.

“The people who come to this country to buy sweets are just being fooled by the ‘high-

quality ingredients' catch phrase. In reality, they are just cheap products."

"....."

Well, in summary...

Let me put it as clearly and concisely as I can.

"In other words, I have been buying sweets in exchange for fruits and a small amount of money while casually letting the shopkeepers know that I am aware of the truth."

○

"...We are in shock. We thought that we would be able to obtain the ideal sweets here... but they are just cheap items...? Compromised ingredients...? There is such a thing as going too far!"

"It looks like you're taking this pretty hard."

"Of course! What is this!? Are they trying to make fools of people from other countries? Rather, why are they selling cheap products despite being so rich? We struggle to understand their motives!"

After we returned to the cafe, she puffed up her cheeks in anger and started slapping the table.

Her vigor caused ripples to spread across the surface of my second coffee of the day.

While picking up the cup, I asked,

"Well, I think you've got the order of things wrong. Most probably, it's not that they are selling cheap products despite being rich—rather, they were able to cleverly find a way to sell cheap products for a high price, so this place ended up full of rich people."

"...What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

Most likely, the people of this country were able to build up their country's image to

the current level because they kept stubbornly selling cheap products for a high price.

By selling cheap sweets branded as high-quality items and using poor children to sell fruit, the adults of this country must have become rich and obtained an elegant, upper class life.

However there was definitely a disparity in wealth here. The poor people earned a daily income by working as shoe cleaners, street performers—or selling fruit on the orders of rich people, and were living their lives in this way.

I took a sip of coffee. A slightly bitter taste spread through my mouth.

“There is no guarantee that you will only ever see righteous and good things, Sabine-san. You may not know this because you are still new to the life of a traveler, but the world is overflowing with people who attempt to earn money through crooked means.”

“.....”

She was visibly shocked.

“How did you guess that I am new to being a traveler?”

“Seasoned travelers don’t buy fruit for an exorbitant price just because they were being sold by a little child, and they clean their boots themselves.”

As for paying the street performers, well, maybe occasionally. However, they would certainly not shower them in gold coins.

“I see... But don’t you feel sorry for those children? If carefree travelers like us don’t help them... Especially that child who was selling fruit, she looked like she would collapse at any moment if we did not extend a helping hand.”

I calmly shook my head.

“Giving them money in exchange for fruit will not help those children at all. The truth is that there are adults who are directing those children from the background. [A poor child walking around selling fruit,] isn’t that something that would move strangers to tears? It’s not just this country, there are crooked adults all over the world who earn



money by using children. Of course, most of the money earned by the children is siphoned off by the adults, and the children are only left with a pittance.”

“.....”

“If you truly wish to help the children, you must not give them any money. If the practice of using children to earn money stops being profitable, then the children will no longer be forced to sell items in such a manner.”

At any rate, buying fruit from the children only provided temporary peace of mind.

For both the children as well as the travelers who gave them the money.

“...Yes, I see.”

I wonder what’s going through her mind right now.

She was just staring at her cup with furrowed eyebrows.

I too received a major shock when I learned that there were evil adults controlling the children from the background.

“Why did you start traveling?”

When I asked that question, the girl suddenly smiled and said,

“There are no sweets worth talking about in our country. That is why we decided to go on a journey centered around sweets. This happened only a few days ago.”

“Hoh.”

“I also planned on studying the sweets from various countries so that I could go back and sell sweets in my country as well.”

“Hohhoh.”

“...However, it looks like We cannot learn anything from this country.”

“At the very least, you’ve learned what it takes to live as a traveler, right?”

“Well, perhaps.”

“.....”

“.....”

After that, we just drank our coffee and spent some time in silence.

“Pardon the intrusion! We are soldiers from this country. We will be carrying out an inspection of this shop.”

The peaceful atmosphere was shattered abruptly.

A soldier with a menacing air had violently opened the door and raised his voice. The sound of his heavy leather boots striking the floor reverberated throughout the shop.

“W-What is that about? He looks incredibly menacing. Was there an incident of some sort?”

“.....”

I moved my face closer to Sabine-san who was sitting opposite to me, and whispered,

“They are searching for the wicked woman who has been popping up frequently over the past few days. Her existence is a problem for these people, after all.”

“.....Doesn’t that mean that they are after you?”

I raised one finger and put it near my lips.

“Shh.”

“No, but...”

“It’s fine. I most likely won’t be found out.”

I pulled out my staff from under the table and cast a small spell on my own hair.

“When I was going around all the sweets shops, I was changing the color of my hair like this.”

I turned my hair black for just an instant, and then returned it to its usual ash-grey color. Of course, when I do it for real, I don't only change my hair. I also change the appearance of my clothes. There is no way I'll be found out.

And so, basically,

“Excuse me. We've received reports of a woman committing wicked acts in the area lately, do you know anything about that?”

I was able to keep a calm face even when the soldier came to our table and asked that question.

The soldier was holding up a painted likeness of a girl with pitch black hair. The girl did not leave any impression of being a witch, she was just plain girl with black hair.

“I see, you have no idea. How about you?”

I had just shook my head, but,

“Eh? Umm... That is...”

It looked like Sabine-san was the kind of person who wasn't good at telling lies.

“.....”

I stomped on her foot under the table.

“You haven't seen her around either, have you?”

“Hiyaaa! N-No, I haven't seen her.”

“Well, that's how it is. Sorry we couldn't be of help.”

The soldier who came to our table looked dubious, but he nodded in assent.

I would have been very happy if the soldier just left at that point, but apparently that

was not all he wanted to discuss. The soldier showed me one more portrait.

“By the way, a princess from a nearby country has gone missing recently, do you know anything about that? She looks like this.”

“.....”

Well, that was a surprise.

It was a portrait of a pretty girl with golden hair. She was looking towards the viewer with a beautiful smile, and if you put a beret on her head and dressed her up in gothic-styled clothes, she would look exactly like the girl who was sitting opposite of me.

“Oh, and her name is Princess Sabine.”

“.....”

Actually, it was Sabine-san herself.

“She apparently disappeared all of a sudden a few days ago. Seeing as there’s a good chance she might have been kidnapped, we are looking around for her in our country as well. If you have any information about that, could you please tell—hmm?”

Sabine-san’s eyes met the soldier’s at that point, and he immediately held up the portrait and compared it to her many, many times.

He also shot several glances at me.

If Sabine-san was a princess who was thought to have been kidnapped, then I wonder just how I appeared to the soldier.

.....

Ah, this is bad.

“You must be the one who kidnapped Princess Sabine!”

“.....”

Just as I figured, it ended up like this.

There's nothing else for it.

Since things had come so far.

I pulled my staff out from under the table.

○

After I gave the floor of the cafe a couple of hard taps with my staff, vines sprouted up and started twisting their way across the ground and, as if they had a will of their own, they captured the soldiers.

Immediately after that, I grabbed Sabine-san by the hand and left the store, but there were soldiers waiting outside as well.

I could hardly expect to talk my way out of this, given that I had just covered the inside of the store with vines. I cocooned all the soldiers in the street with vines as well, and then escaped towards the city plaza.

While pretending to be calm, I hid myself in the crowds of people and continued to pull the girl along by her hand.

“.....”

She was still coming along with me because she was overcome by the pressure of the situation, but thinking about it calmly, there was no reason for her to run away along with me.

“Thank you, Elaina-san. You were looking out for us, weren't you?”

“Eh, ah, that's right. That's exactly what happened.”

That was a lie, of course.

“More importantly, I didn't know that you were the princess of a country.”

“Yes, We started our sweets-centric travels for the purpose of bringing sweets to our

country.”

“.....”

Such a frivolous motive.

“Still, there’s the fact that we were discovered in this country... This is bad.”

“Wouldn’t it be settled if you just went home?”

“We cannot do that! There are no sweets in our country! For the sake of the women in our country, We cannot afford to stop here!”

“By the way, what excuse did you give for leaving your country in the first place?”

“.....”

“I see.”

Well, the soldier had also mentioned that she had gone missing, so it was likely that she had slipped out without saying anything.

There should be a limit for recklessness.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Of course, We will continue to travel. Our travels have only just begun, after all!”

“That’s assuming you actually manage to leave this country.”

“You’re right. That is something We are also worried about.”

By this time, the garrison must have received word that Sabine-san was somewhere within the country. Even if she tried to boldly walk out of the gates like this, I doubt they’d just let her go.

“We would like to make a request of you, Elaina-san. We will certainly repay you someday. Could you please get us out of this country?”

“Hmm... Well, I suppose that would be okay...”

“Seeing the magic you used earlier, Elaina-san, we feel that it should be possible for both of us to escape safely.”

“.....”

I’m not sure how I should feel about that.

“Well, we should probably... be... fine...”

“What was that? We could not hear you clearly.”

“I can only feel a sense of foreboding about taking you along.”

“Oh my! That’s rude!”

Oh, she’s angry again.

However, it feels like Sabine-san is not good at dealing with sudden developments, so for now I should move things forward without allowing her to speak.

Hmm.

“There’s no choice, now that things have come to this. I suppose we’ll just have to use my secret trick.”

“A secret trick? What do you intend to do?”

“For starters, it’s a wonderful trick that will at least make you be silent.”

Saying that, I pointed my staff at her.

“Halt, stop right there. We need to conduct a search of your belongings. There have been dangerous things happening on our country as of late... apparently, there is a woman hiding here who kidnapped the princess of a country. So we are conducting baggage checks.”

Since it was daytime, there was a line of people waiting to leave by the main gate (the extremely flashy one) and soldiers were climbing into the carts belonging to

merchants to check if a pair of women were hidden away inside.

The soldiers went down the line, and finally arrived before me, who was last in the line.

One of the soldiers squatted in front of me.

He probably did that so our eyes would be on the same level.

“...Hmm? Why are you trying to leave the country, Miss? Where’s your mother?”

My current appearance was that of a young girl, not much older than nine years of age. I was holding a staff in one hand and a teddy bear in the other, and was wearing a gothic-style dress.

As usual, my hair is ash-grey and eyes are azure, however, I look about half as old as I usually do. There’s no way I will be found out.

“My mother is waiting outside the country.”

Staying true to my role, I answered the soldier.

“Oh? So you’re going to go outside by yourself? Such a brave young girl. Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Eh, I see...”

“Please allow me to leave as soon as possible.”

Magic that changes my appearance is very tiring. Moreover, right now I also have to keep up Sabine-san’s altered appearance. I’m exhausted just by waiting in line.

“You’re quite something... you have a pretty sharp tongue.”

It looked like the soldier had too much free time.

“By the way, that stuffed animal you’re holding is very cute.”



“Really? She’s called Sabine.”

“Oh, that’s also the name of the princess we are searching for.”

“Oh, I see.”

The teddy bear attempted to move, and I secretly put more strength into the arm holding it as if to restrain it.

“Maybe this stuffed animal actually is Sabine-san.”

I said that with a laugh.

“Hahaha, as if. Oh, the line is moving. Go on ahead, little girl.”

At that moment, the merchants in front of me had finally moved ahead.

After giving the soldier a small bow, I walked forwards.

In this manner, the two of us left that country.

“Well, that was easy.”

I whispered in a low voice so that no one else would overhear.

“Yes, it was easy.”

She whispered back, from her place within my arms.

Hey, you didn’t even do anything.

In that way, the two of us snuck out of the country and parted ways outside.

I’m not sure what kind of path that girl, who was a newbie traveler, took after that.

However, I felt like we would meet again somewhere, for sure.

Now that I think about it, this is just a story about how I tricked people to escape from a country that tricked other people into buying all their sweets.

Not only is it lacking in excitement, there are no dramatic plot twists and even remembering it is difficult.

However, I certainly remember what happened after I left that country—the incident that occurred a year ago.

That streets of that city were extremely normal, and whether it was the alleyways, the city plaza, or even the royal palace, there was nothing worth mentioning.

It did not have a single distinguishing feature, and it was the kind of place that one would soon forget about.

The population was neither too large not too small, and the country was not particularly prosperous. All the people I met there just lived dispassionate lives.

Even so, I remember being invited to the royal palace in that kingdom, and the incident that happened after I was shown into the reception hall.

“What do you think of our country?”

After I had been shown into the reception hall, the person who came to meet me was none other than the princess of that kingdom.

She was a girl with golden hair, whom I remembered meeting at some point.

“It’s quite ordinary.”

Hearing my concise answer, the girl suddenly laughed and nodded.

“That’s right. It’s ordinary.”

She started to set down sweets on the table. The table was loaded to capacity with sweets like macarons, chocolates, and waffles.

“However, I realized it after traveling. This ordinary life is actually a blessing.”

“.....”

“When we saw children walking around with dirty clothes, we would think [Ah, this country has a disparity in wealth.] However, if we only saw people who were dressed in pretty clothes, we strangely did not feel anything about it. People have a tendency to pay attention to only the bad things. Even if a person sees a fresh and beautiful spectacle, their feelings will fade with time and it will eventually become just another sight.”

“Well, that is true. The reason why travelers find every sight to be beautiful is because they are only there for that instant.”

“After that, we had a thought. When a country becomes monotonous and does not make a strong impression on anyone, that is when that country is truly blessed.”

“.....”

“There is no need to force oneself to make speciality products to stand out. Being ordinary might very well be the most difficult thing to achieve and also the happiest state of being.”

“.....So did you give up on trying to popularize sweets in your country?”

Hearing my question, the girl slowly shook her head.

Right now, we are in the middle of distributing books about sweets to people all over the country. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone could make the sweets they liked by themselves?

“Hoh.”

“We are in the middle of preparing for that. We are trying to negotiate with a nearby country to send us the ingredients required to make sweets. They are all inferior goods and ingredients that have special circumstances, but depending on how they are used, we will be able to spread cheap and delicious sweets throughout the country.”

“Hohoh.”

I see, that’s certainly a valid strategy.

“So, are these the sweets made with those cheap ingredients?”

“That’s right.”

“And you want me to sample them and give you my thoughts.”

“That’s right.”

“.....”

I pretended to look reluctant as I picked up one of the macarons.

When I tossed the bright yellow macaron into my mouth, the taste of lemon spread throughout my mouth. It felt identical to the taste of the macarons I had eaten in that country a year ago, when I had first met her.

It was a nostalgic, calming taste.

“How does it taste?”

After swallowing the macaron, I answered her question.

Smiling.

“It’s quite ordinary.”

# Chapter 7

## A Tale of Items:

### The Intelligent Disciple and the Living Items

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Sensei, it has been a while.*

*Since I am currently training in the forest near Robetta, I should be meeting you in person to provide a progress report, but I really do not feel like moving from this spot—I mean, I am unable to leave here for certain reasons and thus I am sending you the update through this letter.*

*As I mentioned in my report a few days ago, your daughter Elaina, who happens to be my favorite student, created a [Potion that lets you talk with items.]*

*Although she says that she made it by accident, it is still something worthy of praise.*

*Despite the fact that she is usually calm and collected, she has a tendency to get carried away if I give her even the slightest bit of praise, so I didn't praise her all that much.*

*However.*

*This is about what happened today, a few days after that.*

*"Sensei, that [Potion that lets you talk to items] I created earlier was a defective product. I'm currently working on something much better. Would you like to see?"*

*"Ah, okay... What exactly are you making?"*

*"It's an improved version. This magic will give the item a human appearance."*

*"Hoho... That's quite something."*

*"Hang on, you can't misuse it, okay?"*

*"Of course I won't. I've learned my lesson after what happened last time."*

*"That's good."*

*Sensei, we have a problem.*

*Elaina has started to get carried away even though I didn't praise her.*

*A potion that gives items a human appearance? Even I've never made something like that.*

*[Dear Top Student,]*

*You needn't do anything.*

*Just leave her alone and the problem will somehow sort itself out.*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Seriously?*

*Ah, I'm enclosing a sample of the [Potion that lets you talk to items] that Elaina created the other day. Please take a look at it.*

*[Dear Top Student,]*

*I'm completely serious.*

*Also, could you stop sending me packages that are to be paid for on delivery? I'll get angry.*

*Besides, what's with this bottle? It's talking. Creepy. Don't you think her hobbies are a little too abnormal?*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*That part of her is just like you.*

*[To my former Top Student,]*

*You are excommunicated.*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Ah, hang on. Sensei, I'm sorry, it was just a joke.*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Umm, it's very upsetting to be ignored.*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Sensei? Senseeeeei~*

*Are you there?*

*[Dear Top Student]*

*By the way, how's Elaina? Is she still getting carried away?*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*Ah.*

*Actually, it turned out exactly like you said it would, Sensei.*

○

There were many problems with the [Potion that lets you talk to items] that I made the other day.

First, it's nigh impossible to store.

Even if I put it in a bottle, the bottle is still an item so it will become capable of speech. It's too noisy. There is certainly room for improvement.

Next, it's hard to tell if the potion is really working or not just based on speech.

There are rare cases where the item just doesn't want to talk, and stays silent even after using the potion. I used the potion on Fran-sensei's tricornie out of curiosity, and maybe it was shy, or it just didn't want to talk to me, it barely spoke.

At this rate, it will be hard to know whether the potion worked at all. There is certainly room for improvement.

The potion I made to enable items to talk is a liquid, of course.

There was one time when I accidentally spilled the potion and it got on the table and floor. That was a horrible experience.

I don't even want to remember that. Again, there is certainly room for improvement.

And, so.

“Mumumu.....”

I was in the process of making improvements.

If I manage to improve this potion, maybe I'll be considered to be more talented than my master. I was thinking of such things.

I soon found a solution that would fix all of the problems.

“A spell that turns items into people... That's what I need. That's the best answer.”

There's no mistake.

If I make it a magic spell instead of a potion, then there is no danger of spilling it, and if it changes the item into a person, then it will be easy to verify whether it worked or not.

Also, if I make it a spell, then I can avoid listening to the annoying voice of the bottle. There would be no need to store it, after all.

Oh? Could it be that I'm a genius...?

“This... This will work!”

Once that was decided, I immediately went to work.

I opened the book I used for research last time, when I had accidentally made the potion, and was absorbed in developing the magic spell.

I came up with a trial version of the new magic spell right away.

“Sensei, that [Potion that lets you talk to items] I created earlier was a defective



product. I'm currently working on something much better. Would you like to see?"

Fran-sensei made a slightly surprised expression, and then started to write a letter to somebody.

○

The spell was completed in a few days.

"I've completed the spell I spoke to you about before."

As soon as I completed it, I went and captured Fran-sensei who was worriedly waiting near the mailbox.

While frequently opening the mailbox and looking inside, Sensei asked,

"Hoho. That's quite something... Exactly what kind of spell did you complete?"

"You're definitely going to be surprised when you hear this. It's [Magic that changes items into people]. It's amazing."

"Ah, that magic you spoke of the other day. You finished it?"

"Yes. It's pretty amazing—look at this!"

After saying that, I fired off a blast of magic.

The light was released towards the mailbox, and the mailbox began to shine after receiving the magic.

After a short while, the shape of the mailbox started to change.

It turned into a cute girl.

"Hey. It's nice to meet you. I'm the mailbox. Thank you for making good use of me. By the way, Witch of Stardust-dono. You've opened me forty two times today, but there are no letters that have been delivered today, you know?"

The girl looked up at Fran-sensei with a smile on her face.

“I see, so this is.....”

Fran-sensei looked down at the girl with a very complicated expression on her face. Perhaps I got a little too carried away at that time.

I used the magic on items and had them do all my chores. For example, I turned one plate into a person and ordered it to wash the dishes, and similarly left the cleaning of rooms to a cleaning rag.

I turned a grimoire into a person and had it explain the parts that I couldn't understand.

I led an incredibly self-indulgent lifestyle.

“Ei.”

And then, one day.

As usual, I sat down in my chair, and tried to turn Fran-sensei's mug into a person and make it fill my own mug with coffee.

I wasn't paying attention, and made a mistake.

The magic that was supposed to be fired from my staff instead came to stop floating just above my staff.

“.....Ah.”

The light that was floating over my staff eventually coated the whole staff and turned it into a person.

“Ufufufufu..... How I've waited for this day!”

A strange character appeared in front of me. She was a young woman, a little older than me.

The young woman who was born from the staff grabbed my shoulders and brought her face close to mine.

“Ufufufu. Elaina-san. What cute child. All this while you’ve been making me work so hard, I’ve been waiting for the day when I could become friends with you. You’re so cute, after all.”

“Ah. Yes... thanks.”

“By the way, do you have a lover?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well then, let’s become lovers!”

“No, we’re both women. Also, I’d prefer a human partner.”

“What are you talking about!? Gender doesn’t matter when it comes to love!”

“Eh, hang on—wah!”

The young lady put more strength into her hands that were holding my shoulders and pushed me down. Wait, you’re not even a human. It’s not even a matter of gender.

There were a lot of comments I wanted to make, but unfortunately I didn’t have time for that.

The young lady was straddling me and had an ecstatic expression on her face as her breathing grew rough.

Ah, this is bad.

“Don’t worry! I won’t hurt you!”

Saying that, she pinned both my wrists with one hand and slowly brought her face closer to mine.

Once they lose their staff, a magician is just a small fry with no means to retaliate. And in this case, my own staff is assaulting me, so it’s even more—uwaaaah scary, scary, scary!

“Stop... Please stop—!”

And then, that young woman—

Just when she was about to kiss me, she turned back into a staff.

“...Seriously. Just what were you doing, Elaina?”

I moved the staff that was blocking my vision, and saw Fran-sensei looking down at me with an exasperated expression.

“That was dangerous. In more ways than one.”

“.....”

“Are you okay?”

I took hold of the hand Sensei extended towards me and allowed her to pull me up.

“I’m okay, for now...”

“Thank goodness.”

I hurriedly fixed my slightly disordered clothes while being filled with shame. Perhaps this is my punishment for getting carried away. I hadn’t imagined that I would be assaulted by one of my own possessions.

Perhaps she understood what I felt, so instead of lecturing me, Fran-sensei just said one thing.

“People and items aren’t the same. Things don’t always go the way you want.”

Saying that, she knocked me on the head.



*[Dear Sensei,]*

*.....That’s what happened, and ever since that incident, she hasn’t used the [Magic that*

*changes items into people.]*

*[Dear Top Student,]*

*The next time I meet my daughter, I will make sure to snap that staff in two.*

*[Dear Sensei,]*

*You're too late, I've already done that.*

# Chapter 8

## Ceasefire after a Decade

With every step I took, I could feel the soft earth squishing beneath my feet.

The unceasing overnight rain that fell in this region had stubbornly left its traces in the form of moisture covering the forest.

The raindrops on the foliage every so often slid off the leaves and fell while reflecting the midday sun, only to be absorbed by the sodden ground or my tricorne.

The path through the forest was damp, and the air was hot as befitting the early summer season.

It's way too hot. So irritating.

".....Uuuu."

A weak breeze gently shook the fallen leaves near my feet.

Walking through the forest while feeling annoyed was the last thing I wanted to do, but if I used my broom to fly in such a situation, I would no doubt be drenched by the remaining raindrops while trying to fly above the trees.

However, I'm getting drenched in sweat by continuing to walk like this nonetheless, so there is no reprieve at all.

"So hot..."

I held my staff in both hands, and continued to walk while directing a weak breeze in my direction.

"Aahhhh... The air is so clammy..."

I don't wear a robe on days as hot as this. I've taken it off. I'm wearing a shirt and skirt

and my tricorne, getup that would make people look twice and wonder whether I was actually a witch or not.

Due to that, the air directed from my staff was able to flow over me without any restriction, and it was barely strong enough to make my ash-gray hair flutter and caress the nape of my neck. However, instead of making me feel better, it only served to irritate me further.

On the list of things that I hate, this damp climate comes right after rain.

I really want to reach the next country soon and let my body rest at an inn.

Let's see.

Just how much further until the next country?

".....Mumu."

It looks like I'll be there in another thirty minutes.

"Another thirty minutes to Selial Kingdom."

There was a signboard helpfully posted along the path that told me so.

"Please feel free to take a break here."

There was even a small bench placed nearby as though it was an afterthought. Although in this climate, it is more like an unwelcome favor.

"....."

However, it looked like there were people in this world who were tolerant enough to accept even unwelcome favors such as this.

There was a man sitting on the bench, absentmindedly fanning himself with a folding fan.

From what I could see, it appeared he had been sitting there for a while. The dampness of his sweat had left patterns on his shirt, and a trace of fatigue could be seen in his

expression. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and there was some grey mixed in with his otherwise black hair. Don't tell me he has been patiently sitting here for a long time?

By the way, there was a large amount of water and food set aside next to him, so maybe he planned to continue sitting there for a while.

That is what I thought, but there was no way that could happen.

Also, there was a strange creature at his feet that had mop-like hair. I wonder if it is a pet. It looks like a giant moss ball.

.....

"Are you a traveler?"

After walking up to the bench, I called out to the man who was sitting there.

I stood there while proudly blowing air at myself with my staff; and forced a refreshed expression on my face.

It seemed my conscience was incapacitated by the heat.

The man slowly shook his head in answer to my question, and,

"No. I'm a resident of that country."

Saying that, he pointed in the direction from which my freshly made footprints extended.

At present you could only see the forest in that direction, but quite a distance away, there was a place called the Melnel Kingdom where I had stayed until this morning.

By the way, there was nothing noteworthy about that country.

"So you're from that country... Are you perhaps a merchant? It looks like you've been working hard."

"No. I'm not a merchant either. I'm just a regular citizen of that kingdom. Also, it's not



like I have any particular work in the Selial Kingdom either.”

“.....?”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“Then what are you doing in a place like this?”

“I’m waiting for someone.”

“Oh? It looks like the person you’re waiting for isn’t very punctual.”

I mean, he’s completely drenched in sweat, after all.

“Seriously. That person has no sense of punctuality at all.”

“How long have you been waiting here?”

I was just curious to hear his answer. I didn’t particularly mean anything by it, nor was I overcome with feelings of admiration for his tolerance in waiting even after being drenched in sweat.

However, the man said,

“I’ve been waiting here for the past ten years.”

After saying something that bothered me a little, he continued,

“Also, I plan to keep staying here in the future.”

And he said something that interested me greatly.

○

“Of course, I have to work as well, so it’s not like I’m here around the clock. But whenever I find time, I always wait here like this. I’ve been waiting here all this time for that person. About ten years have passed in that manner.”

Since my interest was stoked, I sat down on the bench as well and listened as the man,

who introduced himself as Nord, started speaking to me.

To ensure that he didn't have to look twice before realizing it, I introduced myself as a witch, and then,

"Who are you waiting for?"

I asked that while feeling curious.

"My wife. She went to the country down the road ten years ago, and hasn't returned since then. So, I've been waiting here all this time."

"Why don't you just go to that country yourself and look for her there?"

However, the man slowly shook his head.

"That country and mine had a war ten years ago, and we are in a situation where we have no dealings with each other. The current state is such that if someone from my country goes to that country, they won't even open the gates."

"So that's why you can't go."

"Yes. So I've been waiting here."

For ten whole years?

Hang on, more importantly...

"The fact that your wife went to that country ten years ago — does that mean she defected or something like that?"

"No. My wife is a witch. So she went to the other country to fight."

"....."

"I can guess what you want to say. Since she hasn't returned even after waiting for ten years, you think she might be dead, right?"

I nodded.

“I think that might be the case as well. But if there’s even the slightest chance of her still being alive, I have no choice but to wait, do you see?”

“So that’s how it is?”

“That’s how it is. We are a married couple after all.”

“.....”

I was sitting silently, thinking of something to say to him, when it happened.

The creature that was lying beside him got up and started moving around.

“.....”

That creature with long, mop-like hair lifted its round, moss ball-like body off the ground and started moving around on legs that were too numerous to count.

The legs of the creature, what I had previously taken to be hair, were easily taller than me, so sitting on the bench as I was, I had to look up to see its face — or the portion of its body that appeared to be one. I couldn’t see any eyes. It was just a round, fuzzy hairball.

“.....Umm, what exactly is this creature? I had been vaguely wondering about it since earlier, but...”

The fuzzy hairball stretched its innumerable legs between the man and me, and eventually settled down on the bench between us.

The man patted the fuzzy hairball that came to sit beside him and replied,

“Oh, so you were curious about it after all? This here is some sort of mysterious creature.”

“Ah, that is apparent just by looking at it.”

“Also, this creature lives here, on this bench.”

“Oh.”

I unintentionally nodded as if I understood, but...

“Umm... that means...”

On second thought, I don’t understand it at all.

It lives on the bench? Huh?

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know much about this creature either. After the war ended and my wife had still not come back, I started waiting here on this bench. Since that day, this creature has always been here, on this bench. It’s always here, from morning till night.”

“.....”

“Maybe this creature is waiting for someone here as well.”

“.....That may be the case.”

“The reason I’ve been able to patiently wait for my wife here for all this time is because of this guy. I feel strangely comforted when it is by my side, so I am able to wait here like this.”

Saying so, the man once again patted the fuzzy ball.

The fuzzy ball shook slightly.

“.....Does it dislike the touch?”

“No, this is how it shows happiness.”

“.....”

I tried to pat it as well.

Once again, the fuzzy hairball shook a little. From under its tufty texture, I could feel a vibration.

“Ah, now it’s unhappy.”

“I can only see it as having the same reaction as when you patted it.”

“Well, you’re a beginner, so that’s all you see. However, I can tell.”

“So that’s how it is?”

“Yes, that’s how it is.”

“You share an understanding like a middle-aged couple.”

“We’ve been together for ten years, after all.”

“.....”

The man fanned himself with his folding fan as he calmly said,

“And we will be together in the future as well.”

And that’s why he understands everything about that creature — that’s what he told me.

A gust of wind heavy with moisture blew through the forest at that time.

The wind that was neither cool nor hot blew in between us, and the fuzzy hairball shook gently.

I had absolutely no idea what kind of feeling that signified.

○

In that manner, after taking a short break, I finally reached that country.

However.

“Mumu...?”

It was strange.

What I saw before me was at odds with what I had heard from that man.

“Welcome, Witch-sama! Are you from the other country?”

The man had told me that the gates of the country were firmly shut, but not only were they open, the guard at the gate also welcomed me with a beaming smile on his face.

“I am a traveler. I’m not a citizen of the other country.”

“I see! How long do you plan on staying here?”

After asking me that, the guard said,

“We would appreciate it if you could stay for a minimum of three days, at least.....”

“Hmm? Why is that?”

That was a pretty strange request.

Why three days?

The guard replied,

“In three days from now, this country is going to declare a ceasefire!”

He said something even more strange.

I felt my head start to hurt.

I spent the next two days sightseeing in that country. I had been asked to stay for at least three days, after all, and I was also curious about what was going to happen.

It looked like the residents of this country were eagerly looking forward to the declaration of ceasefire.

[Finally, the war is ending!]

[After ten years, the day we've been waiting for has finally arrived!]

[We can finally put this behind us!]

There were signboards and posters with things like that written on them, posted all over the city.

By the way, why was the ceasefire to be announced after three days? When I was staying in the other country, I had heard that the war had ended a long time ago. Why did only this side think that the war was still ongoing?

I wanted to walk around and get some answers, and in fact I managed to kill some time doing exactly that. However, the people of this country weren't able to answer to my satisfaction at all.

"It's okay, you'll understand it after three days."

They just avoided my questions with vague hints like that.

"....."

And then, before I knew it, it was already the day when the ceasefire was set to be announced.

However, after those three days had gone by, I still had no idea what was going on.

".....Why?"

I had no idea what the reason was.

The people had gathered in the plaza of the city. It looked like everyone there was just a spectator, and they were all staring at the center of the plaza like they expected something to happen.

There was a group of soldiers standing there in a circle, armed with rifles. And they were aiming those rifles inwards, at what was inside the circle.

"....."

However.

Why were they aiming their rifles at a large number of strange creatures that looked like fuzzy hairballs? They resembled the fuzzy hairball that was with the man I met on the road in the forest, why were they being surrounded?

To me, it looked like the people of this country were ganging up to torment them, and making a show out of it.

That was because the fuzzy hairballs had gathered together and appeared to be trembling in fright.

“What’s going on?”

I tapped on the shoulder of a person who was staring at the fuzzy hairballs, and asked that question.

And then, that person answered like it was a perfectly natural thing.

“What, isn’t it obvious? It’s the witches from the other country.”

○

I finally heard the truth about what was happening in this country.

It had happened ten years ago.

The effects of the war were felt inside this country as well. A group of around ten witches from the other country appeared in this country.

On the other hand, this country had only a single witch. From the beginning, she had no chance of winning.

The ten-odd witches went on a rampage within the country. They destroyed buildings, weapons... in a methodical fashion, they started to rob this country of its ability to fight.

Driven into a corner, the people of this country left the fate of the country to the only witch from this country.



“Is there no way to destroy that large group of witches in one go?”

They asked her.

That witch, who loved her country more than anything else, gave her life to stop the attacks of the enemy witches.

She gave her life, and in exchange placed a curse on them.

The curse affected the witches who were flying around the country. It turned them into those strange creatures.

After losing their only witch, who was the last ray of hope, this country rushed to prepare for a defensive battle. However, the other country didn't launch any assaults after that.

The war naturally ended in this manner, and the two countries stopped interacting with each other.

“By the way, those strange creatures have some unique features.”

“I see.”

“They are closer to objects than living creatures. They apparently have no need to eat, and they don't die, no matter what happens.”

“Meaning?”

“They were unfazed after being drowned in water, and for some reason didn't burn when thrown into a fire. If hit by a stray bullet, they'll just spit the bullet out. Those things are immortal.”

“.....”

“It looks like the witch from our country planned this so that we would not be able to forget about the war and put the past behind us. However, there is a limit even to immortality. There is a time limit to the curse placed by her. After ten years, they stop being immortal.”

“.....So you mean...”

“That’s right. Today marks the end of those ten years.”

“.....”

“That is why we are celebrating. That is why today marks the end of the war.”

That’s what they said.

The cheers from the gathered populace increased in intensity, and their voices joined together in a countdown.

The sound of the people clapping to the beat of the countdown seemed to urge the soldiers to take action. On the other side of the crowd of people, I caught a glimpse of the soldiers steadying their guns.

And then.

The sound of loud gunshots reverberated throughout the plaza.

○

Amidst cheers and applause, lovely red flower petals bloomed in the middle of the plaza and danced through the air.

“.....”

It wasn’t a metaphor. It was simply and actually just red flower petals floating in the wind. When I held out my hand, one of the petals, blown by the wind, landed on my palm.

The petals were shot out of the guns. They did not spew fire, and of course, no one died. Not only that, but,

“.....Finally! I’ve finally managed to turn human again!”

“Aaah... Those ten years felt so long...”

“I’ve finally been released from hell... Each and every one of those days was so hard to get through...”

“Wine! Someone bring me some wine!”

“I want cake!”

“I’ll take a man instead.”

The strange creatures that were huddled together in the centre of the ring of soldiers turned back into humans — into witches. Amidst the red petals, they were hugging the soldiers and other citizens of the country and rejoicing.

“Umm, what just happened?”

Once again, I was very puzzled.

“What, isn’t it obvious? Everyone is rejoicing because the war has ended!”

“.....”

Huh? What?

“Umm, I thought that since ten years have passed and they are not longer immortal, they would be killed. I was fully expecting a serious situation like that, but...”

“What are you talking about? Of course we wouldn’t do something like that. Over the course of ten years, we mended our relations with those witches. We decided to forgive each other and live together in peace.”

“.....But then, why did you close the gates and refuse to establish contact with the other country?”

“That couldn’t be helped. Once the war was over and both countries tried to reconcile, what do you think would happen if we just handed over the creatures that the witches turned into? Do you think they would forgive us if we said something like [We turned all your witches into these weird creatures, but we don’t have the will to fight anymore?] It would be like throwing fuel on a fire. That is why we waited for the ten

years to pass.”

“Have you forgiven the people from the other country?”

“We forgave them, and received forgiveness in return. It took a long time. That is why we are rejoicing together with the witches.”

“.....”

Thinking about it, it felt anticlimactic.

Saying that they would no longer be immortal after ten years, simply meant that the curse would come undone after ten years. The fuzzy hairballs weren’t shuddering in fear when they were surrounded by the soldiers, instead they were trembling in delight.

What an incredibly anticlimactic ending.

I was completely let down.

“By the way, you’re a traveler, right? Do the people of the other country still bear a grudge against us?”

After hearing that question, I smiled wryly and replied,

“In the other country, today apparently marks the tenth year since the end of hostilities.”

○

After that, I stayed for a few more days in that city filled with joy.

I spent my time interacting with the witches who were finally able to go back to being humans after ten years, and telling the people of the country about the state of affairs outside.

Apparently, the people of country had already decided on what they wanted to do next.

Along with properly opening the country to outsiders after a decade, they planned to

return the witches to the other country and send a formal declaration of peace.

I hope it goes well.

Well, it doesn't really matter to me either way.

“.....”

A few days after that incident, I left that country.

The gloomy rain clouds that hung over the forest had disappeared, and a crisp and dry wind blew across my collar.

It was a pleasant breeze.

It would probably feel really good to fly on my broom on a day like this.

“Alright, time to go.”

Taking a break is fine, but it should be done in moderation.

I stood up from the bench that had been placed in the forest, pulled out my broom, and sat on it side-saddle. Below the gently rising broom, dust swirled on the parched ground and settled on the bench.

The empty bench continued to stand there, as if patiently awaiting the next person who would come to sit on it.

# Chapter 9

## A Tale of Items: The Overgrown Ruins

Good morning. Good day. Good evening.

I wonder which one is the correct greeting? Not that it matters.

This is the first time the two of us have had a correspondence like this, isn't it?

That being the case, allow me to introduce myself properly. It's nice to meet you.

My name is Elaina. The Witch of Ashes, Elaina.

I am a witch with ash-colored hair and azure eyes. I wear a black robe, a tricorne, and a brooch that is shaped like a star.

I'm sure you already know all of this, but I decided to introduce myself, just in case.

Due to some reasons, I am currently trapped in a country that is right under your nose — or rather, something similar to a country. Sadly enough, I messed up. I wasn't being careful enough, and I made a mistake. I can make any number of excuses, like my evaluation of the situation was too naive and I let down my guard, but in the end, it was my blunder.

By the time I decided to run away, it was already too late and I had become trapped in this place. My escape routes were completely sealed. Even now, I can feel the slight remnants of sanity in my head being violated by some external agency. Soon, I will lose all sense of self.

And so, I've decided to throw you outside for the time being.

I have a favor to ask of you, the person who is reading this letter on the other side of this large gate.

Would you please save me? I am most certainly in a strange country right under your

nose, probably experiencing joy while being treated as a slave by some strange beings.

There is only one thing I want you to do right now.

Would be so kind as to take me — the one who is being manipulated by these strange beings — out of this country? If I am able to leave, I think everything will work out. I will probably regain my sanity.

I might probably resist the idea fiercely, but please, take me outside by force if you have to.

Unless you do that, I might end up dying here.

Under normal circumstances, I know that this isn't something I should be asking of you.

However, even if I send out a message from here asking for aid, I don't think there would be anyone who would conveniently come into such a deep forest to save me. By chance, should someone actually come here, would I still be alive at that time? More importantly, would they not end up sharing the same fate as me?

Besides, you are not human.

You are a thing, just like them.

That is why I decided to ask you for help.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime gamble.

It's been a while since I used this magic, so I don't know if you will actually be able to read this letter.

Even if you do read it, there's a chance you might just tear it up and throw it away. Asking you for help after all the time I've spent working you to the bone, there can be nothing more shameless than this.

That is why I am aware that my request is extremely selfish, ridiculous, deceitful, and if it causes you to tear up this letter and throw it away out of irritation, I can't really complain.

However, I cannot keep myself from imploring you.

Please, save me—

When I woke up, I saw that letter lying beside me.

In neat handwriting, that letter contained an apology and a request for help.

“.....”

The place I was standing in looked like a deep forest. Just like what was written in her letter, I saw something resembling a country.

There were puddles of water near my feet, probably because it had rained recently. Peeking into one of the puddles, I saw my reflection.

I had a befuddled expression on my face.

My age was somewhere in the first half of my twenties. I had pink hair that was slightly messy, and apart from the color, I looked exactly like her.

My attire was also shockingly similar to hers, as I was wearing a black robe. However, since I am not a magician, I am not wearing a tricorne or a star-shaped brooch.

“.....”

I was surprised that my human form resembled her to this extent.

It is said that pets resemble their owners, but apparently that principle holds true for possessions as well. I learned something new today.

This is an amazing revelation.

If I manage to safely reunite with her and save her from her predicament, maybe I should share this revelation with her.

“...Right then. Time to go.”



I spoke out aloud to no one in particular.

As expected, my voice was identical to the voice of that person — my owner, Elaina-sama.

○

It happened while I was flying through a forest on my broom.

“Ah, it’s raining.”

What’s more, it was a strong rain that started to fall all of a sudden.

The sky had been overcast and grey throughout the day, and the clouds gave off a feeling that it would start raining at any minute, so I wasn’t surprised when it started to rain. In fact, that is why I had been flying beneath the trees, so that I could take shelter at a moment’s notice.

However, the force with which the raindrops fell exceeded my estimations.

“Eh, come on...”

Well, there was no other way to describe it. The rain easily penetrated through the tree branches that extended over me like a ceiling, and I was soon drenched.

This is certainly annoying.

At this rate, I’ll catch a cold.

“Ugh... Hmm?”

While I had puffed my cheeks in irritation at my misfortune, I saw a large building conveniently sitting at the end of a small path between the trees.

Such good luck.

Without any hesitation, I decided to enter that country.

“Hello~! Is anyone there?”

I had put away my broom, stood in the rain while holding up an umbrella, and then knocked on a gate that was built into a wall shorter than the nearby trees. The branches of the trees and ivy appeared to embrace the walls, and looking at how they appeared to be one with the surrounding forest, it was evident that this country had been around for a long time.

I was waiting patiently, but in my heart I urged them to open the gates quickly.

Right after I silently urged them, the gates opened.

The doors opened with a creaking sound, and I caught a glimpse of the other side of the gate.

“.....”

Seeing what was there, I stiffened.

I was dumbfounded.

[.....]

On the other side of the gate was a single book, floating in the air. It was flapping its pages like a butterfly to remain in the air.

I immediately realized that this was not an ordinary country.

“Ah, hello. Could I stay here for a while to take shelter from the rain?”

I thought about turning back, but I liked the idea of continuing to stay outside in the rain even less.

[.....]

It looked like the book understood my words, as it bobbed up and down once and then turned to follow the path that extended inward from the gate.

“.....?”

Is it asking me to follow?

“Thank you very much.”

And so, I entered that country.

Behind me, the gate that had only opened moments ago made a creaking sound once again.

By the time I turned around, the view of the world outside the gate had already been cut off.

This place looked too decrepit to be called a country, but not quite enough to be called a ruin.

There were things lying around everywhere. I didn't see it from outside the gates because of the heavy rain, but after coming inside I saw the terrible state of the place. The road that ran in between the houses — the road I was walking on — was filled with things like broken crockery, broken watches, stuffed toys with their stuffing leaking out, and other such small items.

This was definitely a strange place.

[.....]

Eventually, the flying book entered a certain building. There was a signboard lying on the ground near the entrance with the words “Inn” written on it. I stepped on the signboard and went inside.

“.....What the heck is this?”

The inside was even stranger.

[.....] [.....] [.....] [.....]

It looked like the flying book was not the only thing that could move by itself. There was a chest of drawers (without the drawers), chairs that were missing a few legs, a broken staff, and a broken broom moving about freely as well. They were moving like living creatures. As soon as they saw me, they started hopping up and down in place.

.....Are they welcoming me?

No, but still.

“Excuse me, may I stay here for a while?”

[.....]

The book moved up and down.

“Thank you very much. Is there a room where I can sleep?”

[.....]

After I said that, the book moved by flapping its pages and showed me to a room. If you wanted to say something good about it, it could be called quaint; or it could simply be called a worn-out single room. Even so, I was thankful.

Despite the worn-out condition of the room, the bed and other furniture appeared to be as good as new, and I could see that they had been repaired. The contrast gave it an uncomfortable feeling.

“What about the payment?”

[.....]

The book moved horizontally from side to side. The raindrops that were still on the book splashed on my face.

“.....Just to confirm, the the bed in this room won’t just start moving around by itself, right?”

[.....]

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

No, it’s not like it ever said anything in the first place.

[.....]

After that, the book slowly left the room, and then,

[.....!]

As expected, the bed started moving about by itself, so I kicked it out of the room. Incidentally, I also threw out the other pieces of furniture that were in the room.

After ensuring that the room was completely empty, I changed my clothes, pulled my sleeping bag out, and went to sleep.

On closing my eyes, I could hear the sound of the rain gently echoing inside the room.

It was still raining on the next day.

Unfortunately, I would have to put my traveling on hold for today as well.

[.....]

The flying book came to my room, as if to wish me a good day.

“Ah, good morning.”

[.....]

“Ah, I’m sorry, but can I stay here until the rain stops?”

[.....]

After nodding once, the book moved back and forth.

Is it asking me to follow?

After that, I shut the door to change my clothes, and then followed the book. After leaving the inn and walking for a while, a castle-like building that was larger than the other buildings in the country came into view.

The flying book stopped there.

[.....]

“What is this place?”

Even though I asked that, the book didn't reply. As if it was ignoring me, it moved and went through the open gate by itself.

“Hmm...”

I was somewhat dissatisfied, but followed it inside as I didn't have any other choice. I thought there was something it wanted to show me.

The book again stopped in front of a door that was at the end of the corridor on the first floor.

[.....]

As expected, the door opened by itself.

After that, I was once again lost for words, just like I was when I first entered the country.

I was dumbfounded.



After carefully reading through the letter that she had sent, I went up to the gate and knocked.

“Good morning. I'm... a traveling item. I am actually an item, but due to certain reasons I currently have the form of a person.”

From the perspective of the floating book on the other side of the gate, this must have been a very peculiar greeting. What on earth is a traveling item?

[Hoho? An item, you say? Then perhaps, can you also hear my voice?]

“Indeed I can.”

[Fumu... Yes, this is very interesting. It was worth living for such a long time after all. I got to see something good.]

“Thank you for the compliment.”

[But why have you taken the form of a human? If you don’t mind, would you mind telling us about your circumstances?]

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

[In that case, I will guide you to the place where my friends are waiting. I would like for you to tell your story in front of everyone. Hearing the tales of an item from outside the country will be good entertainment for us.]

“I see — very well. In return, I would appreciate it if you could prepare room for me where I can stay.”

[Naturally. We will prepare the highest grade room for your use.]

In that way, I was able to openly infiltrate that country.

[Damn, isn’t that chick totally cute?]

[I know what you mean.]

The gates were saying things like that while they shut behind me with a creaking sound.

[By the way, what kind of form did you originally have?]

Hearing someone speak from ahead of me, I turned my head back to the front.

It’s only natural that they should ask. Also, there is no reason why I should hide it.

“A broom.”

So I told them the truth.

“You know how witches carry brooms? I am one of those.”

After walking to the approximate center of the country, I was shown into a castle-like building that was larger than the surrounding structures.

[Please come this way, Traveler-sama.]

Following the instructions of the book that was guiding me, I used the staircase near the entrance to climb to the second floor.

“What kind of castle is this?”

[This place once was a country. It was governed by a king, and this building is where he lived. In short, it was the royal palace.]

“Hoho.”

I continued to follow the book.

“By the way, where is that king now?”

I asked with a puzzled expression.

Hearing that, the book replied without even the slightest hesitation.

“He is no longer around.”

The book only gave me that simple answer.

In a strangely cold voice.

It then stopped in front of a door at the end of the second floor’s corridor.

[Please enter, Traveler-sama. I will introduce my companions.]

○

While I stood there dumbfounded, I saw that there were a few people there, right in front of me.



There were only a few of them, but it looked like there were still people living here.

“Oh my. All your legs are broken? Don’t worry, I’ll fix you up as good as new.”

“Plate-san, Plate-san. You’re not exactly young anymore, so you should probably show some restraint — Hiii! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please don’t throw the broken shards at me!”

“Hohoho. Plushie-dono, you are in a sorry state indeed. No matter, I will fix the damage.”

Apparently, these people were tasked with repairing the items here. They were spread out inside a large room, and were sitting in front of items that looked very old and damaged. There were both men and women from different age groups. They looked like they came from various walks of life, as there were some dressed as travelers and some others dressed as magicians.

In short, it was a room filled with chaos.

While wondering what was going on, I walked over to an old man who was in the middle of working. He was dressed like a magician, and gave the impression of being an experienced veteran.

“Excuse me, what exactly are you doing?”

The old man looked at me, and,

“Hou, a newcomer? A cute one to boot.”

“Huh?”

What does he mean by ‘newcomer?’

“Fumu fumu. Are you a witch? That is good. Our workload will be reduced by quite a bit.”

“Umm... What do you mean by ‘workload’ and ‘newcomer?’ I don’t understand.”

“Hmm. It looks like you still don’t know what sort of place this is.”

“I only arrived here yesterday.”

“That explains it.”

The old man stroked his snow white beard, and then spoke while sewing on the arm of a small bear plushie that was hopping up and down in front of him.

“This is a place where broken items are fixed. All items eventually reach the end of their life span, and we are tasked with repairing the items that come here.”

“I see.”

“Incidentally, items that were broken on purpose before reaching the end of their lifespan also come here.”

Hoho.

Are the people here masochists or something?

“Fumu...”

However, why are these people being made to repair the broken items?

“Did you come to work here after being hired by the people who live in this country?”

If possible, I wanted to meet with the people who lived here — I would like to understand what is happening in this strange country.

However, the old man shook his head.

“Unfortunately, that is not the case. We are simply working here in this country.”

“.....”

I suddenly had an idea.

“I see. So you were all also caught in the torrential rain yesterday and came here to

seek shelter?”

And so, they are repairing the items as thanks for being allowed to stay.

I see, I see.

“No — Unfortunately, that is not right either. We are all living here. We are living here for the purpose of dedicating our time to the items in this country.”

“So you’re staying here full time? Why go to such an extent?”

“No idea. I have forgotten the reason. Hohoho.”

It looks like this elderly gentleman’s memory has declined quite a bit.

“...Since when have you been living in this country?”

“No idea. It was probably since quite a long time ago. I found this place when I was working a traveling merchant in search of popular products. At some point I had started toiling away in here.”

“.....”

After hearing what he had to say, I finally realized what was strange about this place — a place which seemed like a country, but wasn’t actually one.

Thinking back, just the fact that items were moving about by themselves was more than enough reason to feel that things were strange.

I turned around to look at the book that was floating in the air. It was still completely silent while hovering in place like a butterfly.

[.....]

It looked like the book noticed my gaze, as it came up to me. As usual it was silent, and showed no signs of wanting to speak, so I had no idea what it was trying to tell me.

And then, the book came to a stop in front of my eyes.

[.....]

That's when it happened.

A feeling like my head was hit with a hard object — and then I was assaulted by a sense of instability as if the world had flipped upside down.

When I recovered my wits, I realized that I was lying down on the floor, and the flying book was looking down at me.

My body felt as heavy as lead and I could feel my control over my body slipping away, until at last I wasn't able to move so much as a finger.

My memories of what happened after that are quite vague.



“So, these are your companions?”

The second floor of the castle. The room at the end of the corridor was overflowing with all kinds of items.

From small items like pens, to large items like bookcases. There was a wide variety of them. They were looking at a book that had the same cover as the book that was hovering beside me, and were talking amongst themselves.

[No, it's like I said. Look at this! It's completely broken! It will never move again.]

[I've lived a very long life after all... my body has broken down in several places over the years. Hey, why don't you try fixing it?]

[This is the end of the road for me... I am a defective product that can't even move properly... Uuu...]

Those items that were pathetically complaining all at once to the books all looked to be fairly old and were in bad shape.

Just what kind of place is this? Seeing me look puzzled, the book gave me an explanation.

[This is the reception desk for items looking to be repaired.]

“Hoh.”

[After taking requests for repairs or periodic maintenance here, we send them to the repair room that is located on the first floor.]

“Hohoh.”

[It is also a place where my companions gather to talk about useless things.]

“Do all old people have a habit of gathering in such places when they have nothing to do?”

[In addition, it has become something of a fad lately for different items to combine their bodies together. See, over there in the corner of the room where the items are piled up.]

“I see it. But it looks like nothing more than a trash heap to me.”

Hearing that, the book started to laugh.

[Since we have no way to amuse ourselves, we have an overabundance of free time. It can't be helped.]

While speaking, the book moved towards the back of the room.

[Come this way, Traveler-sama. I will introduce you to everyone.]

I followed behind the book as asked, but maybe because my current appearance was very strange, I could tell that the gazes of the old household items, and the gazes of the books that were keeping them company, were all focused on me.

The book that was guiding me stopped in the center of the room, and spoke while flying around me in little circles.

“Hello, everyone. Today, a companion of ours with an unusual appearance has come to our country. Please take a look. It is an item with the form of a person.”

A commotion spread throughout the room.

[Imagine that, an item with a human form.]

[This is highly unusual.]

[It was worth living a long life, just to see this.]

[Poor thing, being forced to take the form of mere humans...]

[Everyone, please remain silent. The fact that such an item exists is a grave situation that we should all be concerned about. Let us hear from her about how she came to take such a form. After that, let us offer her our support.]

And then, the book said,

[The fact that she is an item just like us is reason enough. She is our companion.]

After saying that, it left my side and came to rest at a spot away from me, as if urging me to go ahead and talk.

I felt like all the gazes in that room were gathering on me.

“.....”

After staying silent for a while, I began to speak.

I spoke while going over the plan that Elaina-sama had outlined in her letter, a plan that would help her escape from here.

“I was turned into this state due to a curse that was cast on me by an evil witch—”

○

My memories from after I fainted were very vague.

When I woke up, I saw that I had been returned to my room. Strangely, the bed and other furniture that I had pushed out of the room had returned their original places,

but for some reason I found that I didn't particularly mind that as I stood up and walked out of the room.

My destination was the first floor of the castle.

Just like the other people there, I was working to repair the broken items.

"Uwaah, you're so dirty. But it's okay. I am a witch, so I can take care of this amount of dirt, no problem."

The voice that came from my mouth had a sickeningly sweet tone, wholly unlike my usual voice. I was talking to the item that was not really an item while using magic on it.

"Fumu. Not bad, newcomer. It looks like you have a knack for this. Hohoho."

"You think so? Ufufu."

The girl who had a broad smile on her face after being praised by the old male magician who was working nearby was also unfortunately me.

In that place, I ceased being myself.

I spent the whole day in that manner, with my memories and consciousness vague as if I was within a dream. My body refused to obey my will, it was as though I had been turned into a puppet.

Perhaps the most frightening thing was that I didn't even find that to be strange.

I came back to my senses only once night had fallen and I returned to my inn room.

"Uuu... Just what is going on..."

When I thought of my scary reality, I couldn't stop trembling.

Now that I think about it, I've visited a similar place once in the past.

It was a strange country that had a lot of cats, and the people were all entranced by them. Back then, I was able to escape because I coincidentally happened to be allergic

to cats, but...

If this place is similar to that, and there is some property that causes people to become entranced — just what could be the source of this power?

.....

There was no need to even think about it. This was a place where people were entranced by objects. No doubt the people here are made to love objects without any limits, just like what happened in that other country.

“...Mumumu.”

This is a problem. I need to escape from here, no matter what. Even if it is still raining, that doesn't matter. Compared to being outside in the rain, this place is even worse.

There's no time like the present, I might as well make my move right now—

Just as I was getting anxious and pulled out my broom,

“...Uwaah.”

Before I could react, the sheets from the bed that had returned to the room shot out and bound my hands, and pulled me down unmercifully.

Ah, there's no way I can run away from here.

That's what I thought after I was unceremoniously dumped into the bed and covered with a blanket.

“.....Uuu.”

This place is like a prison.

The next day as well, I spent the day working in a dreamlike trance as if it was entirely normal.

“—There you go! You're all fixed up. Take care!”



With a big smile on my face, I was seeing off a stuffed toy that I had just repaired a few minutes ago. I was even waving my hand. I felt like asking that girl just who the heck she was. Even though it was me.

When it was time for lunch, we were served food that was barely sufficient by the the frying pan and chopping board (as usual, they were quite old).

The food they gave us, without exception was grass, grass, and even more grass that was probably growing somewhere nearby. In other words, they were weeds.

“Hohoho. This is delicious.”

“This raw leaf is so juicy!”

“Ahh... to think I would be eating so well... I am so fortunate.”

However, everyone was eating it very happily.

I was taken aback. However, my expression was still stuck in a smile.

“.....”

My face still had a smile on it as my hand reached for the weeds, but that was really too much to bear, so I put my entire will into stopping my hand from moving. My hand was trembling in mid air as my will and something else fought a desperate battle for control.

“Hmm? It looks like you are still able to regain your sanity occasionally.”

The old man spoke to me while looking at me doubtfully. While munching on the weeds.

“Looks... like... that’s the case...!”

Ah, I was able to speak.

“Hohoho. I was like that in the beginning as well. I didn’t want to work in this place, so I tried my best to slip out somehow.”

Oh?

“H-How... about... now...!?”

“Stop talking in a hoarse voice with that smiling face, it is scary.”

After finishing all the weeds on his plate, the old man spoke.

“I don’t particularly feel anything now. In fact, I am happy from the bottom of my heart that I can stay here.”

“.....”

“Don’t worry, you will feel the same way sooner or later. Just like me and the other people here.”

And then, the old man told me this.

“Don’t worry about it. Just surrender yourself to the items here. You will be able to live in peace.”

There’s no way I’m going to do that.

That is what I wanted to say to him, but unfortunately that was when my consciousness lost the fight.

It was like that in the beginning.

Which means that the more time passes, the harder it will be to find a chance to escape.

Looking at it another way, it means that there is still a chance for me to escape right now.

“...Mumu.”

That night, I had a thought.

Ah, I can just use my broom to escape.

Fortunately, as it hadn't been too long since I was locked up here, there were times when I was able to exercise control over my whole body.

It was the same on the day that the persistent rain had finally stopped, and on that day I regained full use of my body once again.

"This is my chance."

Or so I thought.

I was not foolish enough to waste such a chance.

I immediately took control of my body and prepared to escape as quickly as possible.

"Ei."

First things first. The furniture and bed would just get in my way. I pushed them out of the room immediately. While I was at it, I froze the door solid with ice and made it so nothing could enter the room. I could hear loud noises coming from the other side of the door but I just ignored them.

"Hiyaa—"

The second step. I pulled out my broom. That's it.

"Haa!"

The third step. I cast two spells. The first was a simple spell that any magician can use, but it was also a spell that people rarely had any use for. The second was a spell that I invented back when I still had a lot of free time on my hands, during the time I studied under Fran-sensei.

I cast both those spells.

"Eiyaa!"

And now for the last step.

I wrote a letter. That's it.

My preparations went without a hitch.

[.....!] [.....!] [.....!] [.....!]

However, there was no way that they would let me escape so easily. As soon as I finished writing the letter, the bed and other furniture that I had kicked out of the room gathered a large number of their companions and broke through the frozen door.

After the ice shards went flying everywhere, I saw a bed, a desk, a chair, a plate, a kitchen knife, rope, a futon, and sheets fly into the room as a group.

I immediately ran away. Just as I planned, I broke through the window and flew over the area outside that looked like an abandoned ruin.

As I thought, they didn't seem to want to let me escape so easily, as a flood of items came through the broken window and chased me. Strangely enough, even the shards of the window glass that I had broken only moments ago were also chasing me.

Holding onto the broom with one hand, I used my staff to shoot many of them down with blasts of wind, but unfortunately there were too many of them.

Not just the items that had come through the broken window, even the ones that were lying around in the area started to chase me.

Eventually, the group of items turned into a giant swarm.

“Uwaaah...”

While feeling somewhat repulsed by the sight, I turned my gaze to the front. I was only a short way away from the gate of this strange place. It would be good if I could just leave this place behind like this.

—However, things didn't go that smoothly.

Just when I drew close to the gates, my body stopped responding to my will as if this was the plan all along. Even though I tried my best to force my body to listen, all I managed was to make my body tremble.

Eventually, my body jumped off the broom against my will.

“.....So I failed, after all.”

I crashed into the roof of a building and lay there, looking up at the sky. At this point, my body even stopped trembling as I lost control entirely. Only the part of my body from my neck up was still able to maintain my consciousness.

“.....”

No, I expected this to happen. I knew it would end this way.

It would have been for the best if I was able to actually escape on my broom, but from what the old man said, I understood that even if I tried to escape in such an ordinary manner, it would not work.

Even if I tried to escape, the strange power that filled this country would interfere with my mind and immobilize me. Even if I used magic to destroy every single item I saw, it would have ended in the same way.

However.

That is why I cast those two spells on my broom.

The first was a simple spell.

It was a simple magic that would let my broom fly by itself for a certain amount of time.

The second spell is the important one.

The second spell gives life to items. It gives them life, and changes their appearance to that of a person. It is a very strange spell that has very few applications. Back when I was studying under Fran-sensei, I used this spell a lot to pass the time.

I never imagined that it would come in useful at a time like this.

I was the target of the items that were chasing me. There should not be any reason

why they would chase after a mere broom. Surely, my broom will be able to safely escape from this country.

Looking up, I saw my broom flying away by itself through the sky.

“Please...”

Please, save me—



The letter that was written in that manner had some more details as well.

The letter explained in great detail about how exactly Elaina-sama planned on escaping from here. It was written in such great detail that it would be hard to believe that it was written in a hurry.

It is my belief that the items in this country have been driven mad due to continuously being exposed to the magical energy that is pouring out from the surrounding forest.

For some reason, there is no sign of the original residents of this country. The only people here are those like me, who have wandered in here by accident. And every single one of them have been enslaved by the items.

Most probably, the items in this area hold feelings of dislike towards humans.

So here's what I think.

I am certain that when the items here find out that you are an item with the appearance of a person, they will start to feel pity for you. They will likely show you unneeded sympathy. Once they meet you, they are certain to ask about how you ended up in such a state.

When they do, here's what you should say.

“I was turned into this state due to a curse that was cast on me by an evil witch.”

You will need to lie and tell them that you were given human form because of a curse cast by an evil witch who wanted to torment you.

And then, ask them this.

“That witch is so evil that she has even taken the lives of other people. I am currently searching for her whereabouts. Everyone, have any of you heard about her? She has ash-grey hair and azure eyes, and is fairly young.”

This will almost certainly cause the items who heard that to feel shaken. There might even be items that react with anger.

There is no chance that none of them will remember me. When they find out that the hated person who came to their country just a few days ago is actually a personification of evil, they will not be able to stay calm.

And then, for the final act.

This is what you should tell them.

“If any of you remember seeing such a person, can you please bring her to me? I need to take her back to my home country and have her executed.”

They will most likely be happy to hand me over to you.

The suffering of humans is their greatest delight, after all.

...And that's what was written in the letter.

I proceeded according to the directions laid out by Elaina-sama.

As per her plan, the objects who were listening to me set great store by my words, lamented over my fake circumstances, and cursed and showed hatred towards the witch with ash-grey hair.

So far, things went according to plan.

[I see... You must have had a very hard time after being turned into such a horrible form. Truly, I feel for you from the bottom of my heart.]

“Thank you for your consideration.”

I made a show of being thankful towards the book that was totally off the mark with regard to my actual feelings.

They will probably never understand my true feelings of being happy at having the same appearance as my owner.

“So, did that witch come here?”

I tried to move things along. I want to help her escape from here as soon as possible.

[Yes, she’s here. Right now, she’s probably helping with the repairs downstairs.]

“In that case, I would appreciate it if you would hand her over to me.”

When I said that, the book shook sideways.

[That is not possible.]

“Eh?”

I was wavering at this situation that was different from what was expected, and the book explained further.

[Unfortunately, we cannot hand her over to you. We have already planned to execute that witch ourselves.]

“.....Eh?”

I was shocked this sudden turn of events.

Elaina-sama, what should I do now?



In the end, I raised a fuss saying that I wanted to check if that person really was the Witch of Ashes, and I was taken to the room on the first floor.

And sure enough, Elaina-sama was there.



“Uwaah. This is horrible. Look at those split ends! Your hair is an absolute mess. Oh, and the cuticles are a mess too.”

She was in the middle of repairing a broom.

[Oh? You’re a cute one. Hehe. Show me your panties.]

“Alright, let me fix this~ Please stay still for a bit~”

By the way, it looked like their attempt at talking to each other was a failure.

The book approached my side and asked while looking at that scene,

[Is that the evil witch?]

“.....Yes, that’s her. Still, why were you planning to execute her?”

“She has rampaged too much within this country. Also, she seems to be quite stubborn and her mind refuses to conform to our country’s standard. If she is left alone, she might completely regain her consciousness someday.”

“And so you want to execute her? That’s a rather violent way of thinking.”

“Compared to how we used to be in the past, we have actually become quite peaceful. Back then, most items would just try to kill humans on sight.”

“.....”

At this point, I remembered something. So I asked a question.

“By the way, what happened to the people who originally used to live in this country?”

The book answered my question.

[They’re all gone.]

The reply was deadpan.

[We threw them out.]

“There you go, now you’re as good as new!”

[Hey, how about going on a date with me next time? Hehe.]

“Next customer, please~”

By the way, Elaina-sama was continuing her work in an indifferent manner.

The book told me the truth behind what had happened in that country.

It was a little over a decade ago.

He said that back then, this place was still a proper country where a lot of rich people lived. It was a fairly prosperous country with a large population.

However they were all horrible people who did not treat things with care.

The country was surrounded by a forest. They had an overflowing source of raw materials, as all they had to do was chop down a nearby tree and they could make more items. Items were rarely repaired in that country; if something broke, it was usually just replaced.

The people were too lazy to even transport the old items out of the country, so they were all just thrown away in one corner of the country. Even though they were still usable and were still alive, the people made up reasons like “they are scratched up” and “were bored of using the same old things” to throw them away.

With their feelings of resentment growing ever stronger, the pile of items that were thrown away while they were still in the middle of their lifespans observed how those people were living their lives.

The small pile of items that were thrown away in a corner of the country eventually kept getting larger and larger.

Their hatred and pent-up resentment also naturally grew over time.

Eventually, once the height of the heap of items grew higher than a tree, the people

started saying things like,

“What should we do with all this trash?”

“It’s just taking up valuable space inside the country.”

“It’s in the way.”

“It’s ruining the view.”

“Let’s just bury it under a mound of dirt and call it a hill.”

“Let’s throw them out somewhere else.”

The conversation on this topic lasted for a long time, but the word “reuse” did not appear even once during the discussions.

In the end, the people of the country agreed on a compromise wherein half of the objects would be disposed of elsewhere, and the other half would be buried. Despite the fact that the items were still in usable condition.

At that moment, the anger of the items that had been buried reached the bursting point.

And that is when the change occurred.

The items that had been mistreated by the humans gained the ability to move by themselves, and the people started to adore items. It was just like what happened in that country where the people had turned into cat lovers.

Perhaps the magical energy that resides inside deep forests has such an innate ability to mess with minds.

In any case, all the people who happened to be there at the time turned into servants of the items.

Meanwhile the objects used their resentment as their driving force and became capable of moving around by themselves.

Despite the change in the people's attitudes, this was not enough to sate the anger of the items. After being thrown away like common trash, the items had lost all faith in humanity.

[This place will be our country from now on. You bastards get out and leave behind everything you own.]

The items gathered the people of the country in one place, said those words to them, and kicked them out of the country.

However, since people are unable to hear the voices of items, it is likely that they just ran away after being creeped out by the sight of items moving around on their own.

In any case, that was how this country made up of only items came to be.

However, the items had made a grave mistake.

Even items will stop moving once their lifespan is over. For about ten-odd years, no people approached the country and the items lived in seclusion, but then their comrades started collapsing one after the other.

If any items broke, there were no people around to fix them.

The items were just troublemakers without any plans.

Since they were in trouble, the items decided to open the gates of the country and invite people inside.

Travelers who had lost their way and happened across the country by chance, for example.

Or travelers who just wanted to take shelter from the rain.

Without exception, the people who came nearby were allowed inside, made to fall in love with items, and treated like slaves and put to work.

And then, a few days ago, she had come to this country — that is what I was told.

That night.

[Eh? A witch with ash-grey hair? Oh, that one. She's being housed in that inn over there.]

It was quite late in the night when I sneaked out of the high-class inn (though despite being called that, it was, as expected, quite old and in pretty bad condition) and I went around asking every object I found that was still awake until I found out where Elaina-sama was staying.

Since she had caused such a huge ruckus yesterday, I was worried that she might have been moved from her inn room to the prison, but it looks like she is still in the inn that she originally stayed in after coming here.

"I would like to see more of how that witch is suffering in this country. Please let me see her."

When I said that while putting on a prideful air, the items easily accepted my request and led me to her.

I might have a human appearance, but I am actually an item. I don't need to fear having my head messed around with by staying in this country.

Which means that until the magic wear off — until I return to being an item, I can come and go as I want.

And so, after a day's gap, I returned to the place where Elaina-sama was staying.

"Excuse me."

I opened the door after knocking, and saw Elaina-sama there.

She was sitting on the bed and gazing blankly up at the moon through the window. A slight breeze was blowing in from the window that I broke the other day, and it was caressing her beautiful hair.

The window had still not been repaired, and the fragments of glass on the floor were

peevishly raising cries like [Come on, fix me already.] I'll just ignore them.

"So you are the Witch of Ashes, Elaina-sama?"

When I called out to her, she turned her face towards me.

"That's right. Who are you? Oh, are you a newcomer? I see..."

"I didn't say anything of that sort."

"I'm sleepy, so I want to go to bed soon."

"I'm not going to let you sleep tonight."

"Lewd."

"It was a joke. Ahem."

I cleared my throat, and,

"Actually, I came here today to inform you about something."

I moved the conversation to the main topic.

"Inform me... Actually, just who are you?"

"I am one of the high-ranking people in this country."

That was a lie.

"A high-ranking person...? Was there such a thing?"

"Yes, of course. Actually, I decided to meet you in person after seeing your work here."

"Oh, you're here to praise me?"

"It's the opposite."

"Eh?"

I continued to spout more lies.

“You have been fixing the items here a little too well. In the first place, the items in this country aren’t really that keen on being repaired.”

“What did you say?”

“In fact, they actually want to be broken.”

That was of course a lie as well.

“Really? But the people in that large castle said that repairing the items was our job.”

“They are all mistaken as well.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m serious. All the items that are gathered in this country have the same thoughts as well. It looks like there was a misunderstanding because you can’t understand what they are saying, but they are actually all masochists.”

“Masochists...”

“More than anything, being destroyed by a girl of tender years like yourself gives them the greatest joy.”

“Joy...”

“They want to be broken but are getting repaired instead, so they have a lot of pent up frustration.”

“Pent up...”

“That’s the current situation.”

“No way...”

Elaina-sama sat with her head down and looked crestfallen.

I raised my hand and pointed at Elaina-sama.

“However, you don’t need to worry. There is still time to fix your mistake.”

“What?”

“This is what you should do from here on—”

I had gotten that far when it happened.

The sheets from the bed that had been silently listening until then suddenly stretched out and bound my hands.

I was immediately pulled into the bed and covered by the blankets.

[You bastard. What are you plotting? Are you planning to go against us?]

The bed was talking to me.

[I will be reporting your suspicious actions to my comrades.]

“I won’t give you the chance to do that.”

I continued talking from where I was interrupted.

“Elaina-sama, from now on, destroy every single object that stands in your way. That is the best way to show respect for them.”

“Ehh... Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m serious. By the way, the gates of this country wanted to be destroyed by you.”

“Really?”

“Please destroy them. Right now.”

“Right now?”



“Right now, please.”

“.....”

Elaina-sama looked like she was thinking about it, but replied right away.

“I understand. I’ll go destroy them.”

“That is for the best — by the way...”

“Is there something else?”

I stretched out a hand from the bed and said,

“This bed is also a masochist.”

“So I should destroy it?”

“Please do.”

Elaina-sama nodded at my words and took out her wand. And then she pointed it at the bed that was restraining me.

[Hang on, if you do that you won’t get off lightly — ahhhhhhhhhhh!]

An agonized cry echoed through the room, but I’m sure Elaina-sama didn’t hear it.



The path from the inn to the gates was filled with the screams of many items.

“Ei.”

[It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! Ahhhhhh!]

“Ya.”

[Hiiiiii! Please, no more—]

“Toryaa.”

[Noooooooooooo! I’m going to breaaaaak!]

“Eiyaa.”

“You bastard, how dare you — Ah, hang on, noooooooooooooooooo!”

Elaina-sama’s gallant figure as she cut through the swarms of items assaulting her was a sight to behold.

“Umm, is this really the right thing to do?”

The look of doubt on Elaina-sama’s face was also a treat to see. Truly a sight for sore eyes.

“It’s fine. They are all very happy.”

Of course, that was a lie. I followed behind Elaina-sama while lying with a straight face.

Apparently, lying is my forte.

Is this also a case of resembling my owner?

As expected of a witch. There was no way that mere objects could stand against Elaina-sama, and we reached the gates without breaking a sweat.

However.

[It looks like we should not have believed the words of an item that has a human form.]

Even though we had made it this far, it looked like going out through the gates would take quite a bit of effort.

All sorts of items had gathered together and taken the shape of a gigantic humanoid monster. It seemed they had created a monster on the fly by gathering all of the items that were nearby.

The monster made up of items was large enough to look down on the gates, and even

the trees of the forest.

[Fuhahahaha!]

And it let out a laugh like that of a mob character.

Ah, I did hear that combining different items together was the current fad.

[How foolish.]

The book that was speaking was located approximately in the place where the face should have been.

[A large number of our comrades have died because of you two. You shall not be forgiven. We will use this giant that was formed from the bodies of all our remaining comrades and send you to the depths of hell—]

“Ei.”

One of the arms of the so-called giant was blown away.

[Hang on, I’m still in the middle of talking here.]

“Elaina-sama, please wait a moment.”

“Ah, sorry.”

After seeing the arm that was blown away flatten a nearby house, the giant (actually, the book) spoke.

[Humans are always like this. They are selfish, make as many of us as they want, and abandon us without a second thought when we are no longer of any use to them. How foolish. They create us, but take no responsibility for the lives that they create. And what’s more, our words never reach them — can you understand it? The anger of being thrown away while you’re still far from reaching the end of your life?]

“Sorry, but no.”

I shook my head.

It is something I, who have been cared for by her ever since I was born, can never understand.

[This is the shape of our anger. This giant is the personification of our resentment towards humans! With this, we will destroy the detestable humans—]

“Ei.”

The remaining arm of the so-called giant was also blown away.

[Wait.]

“Elaina-sama.”

“Eh, you’re still not done?”

“Please wait a little while longer.”

“Mu.....”

Elaina sama’s pouting face was also incredibly cute, but we are in the middle of an important discussion right now.

Let’s get back to the main topic.

“I understand why you are all angry with humans. However, that doesn’t give you the right to hurt people.”

[What are you talking about? They hurt us, so we will hurt them back. Isn’t that a perfectly legitimate reason?]

“And I am telling you to know your place. We are made when required, and thrown away when we are no longer needed. That is our fate.”

[But then we will be no more than slaves!]

“I’m not done talking.”

Saying that, I continued to speak.

“When we are no longer required we are thrown away — after that, we just need to wait. Keep waiting until we are remade, and until we are needed again. Wait while treasuring the memories of the time when humans took good care of us.”

That’s why, holding such resentment is like barking up the wrong tree — that’s what I told the giant while looking up at its face.

[Even if we are barking up the wrong tree, our anger is genuine! We will never forgive humanity — and you as well! The two of you will die here together!]

“.....”

Well, that’s that.

It looks like my words aren’t reaching them at all.

“You are all mistaken.”

Despite that, I continued to talk to them.

“However, I understand your feelings at not being cared for.”

Saying that, I tapped Elaina-sama on the shoulder.

It looked like Elaina-sama understood what I wanted to say with just that action, as she readied her wand.

Magic was released from her staff, and it blew the body of the giant that was about to attack us to pieces.

“Now, I hope you can rest in peace.”

I wonder if my words are still not reaching them.



After we walked out through the gate, Elaina-sama finally regained her consciousness.

In the forest, under the moonlight, she had a horrible expression on her face.

“.....I feel like I’ve woken up from a terrible nightmare.”

“Unfortunately, it was all real.”

“.....You are... You’re my broom, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Indeed I am.”

“.....”

“Is something wrong?”

Her hair moved a little as she gently shook her head.

“It’s just that you look a lot like me, so I was surprised.”

“I’m sure that items resemble their owners.”

“Just like pets, huh?”

I just nodded silently.

“.....”

Both of us fell silent for a while.

During that time, her expression was so complicated that I don’t know how to put it into words. It looked like she was deeply considering something, or worrying over something, at any rate, it was a dark expression.

“Is there a problem?”

I tilted my head and asked her that.

Hearing that, Elaina-sama replied.

“.....Umm. Thank you... for saving me. Also—”

I didn't want to hear what she was trying to say.

She also wrote the same thing in the letter, but even though she had magic that would let her speak to items, and knowing that she could talk to them if she wanted, she never attempted to meet me face to face. She probably wanted to apologize for that.

“I understand how you feel.”

I spoke while cutting her off.

“There is no need to worry. Even if we cannot talk to each other, even if my voice doesn't reach you, I will always belong to you. No matter how hard you make me work, I will not resent you.”

“.....”

“However, I'm not sure what to think about flying around with a ghoul's head still stuck on the front.”

“Ah, sorry about that.”

I continued to speak.

“I'm not particularly bothered by it — but if you want to make it up to me no matter what, I do have one request.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you willing to hear it?”

Elaina-sama immediately nodded.

And I so I unreservedly made one selfish request.

“—Please, save them.”

The country where items are capable of moving autonomously... It has been a few weeks since I was there.

The sky is clear. The invigorating breeze of the early summer blew through the trees of the forest and caressed my face.

“.....”

I had only been away for a week, but the place already looked a lot different from before.

Was it because the sky was no longer overcast?

No, that's not the only reason.

“Wow, this is really quite amazing.”

“There are so many...”

“Hey, stay in line! Stop messing around.”

“Hey, I saw that first!”

“Shut up, I don't care.”

“It's first come, first served.”

“Hohoho.”

Near the narrow gate, merchants were arguing with each other while carrying items out of the country. The beds of their wagons were piled with such a large number of broken items that the horses that were pulling them were without exception crying out in distress.





“Hey there. This is really an amazing place, huh? It’s overflowing with wonderful items. If we fix them up a bit and sell them, they’ll fetch a considerable profit.”

One of the merchants said that to me.

“Really, thank you so much. It’s lucky that you discovered this place.”

“I came across it by accident when I was looking for a place to take shelter from the rain.”

The items that were loaded on the wagons were all broken, but could be used again after repairing them.

They have not yet reached the end of their lifespan.

Perhaps that is why she wanted to once again give them a place where they could be of some use.

Perhaps that is why she wanted to save them, so that they could have a happy life this time around.

“Witch-san. Here.”

One of the merchants said that as he pushed a bag into my hands. It was fairly heavy, and looking inside, I saw a number of silver coins.

“I gathered that along with my comrades. Please accept it. It is a repayment for showing us such a good place.”

“.....”

I immediately pushed it back into the merchant’s hands.

“I don’t need it. I didn’t tell you people about this place because I wanted money.”

“Hmm? Then what was the reason?”

I replied to the merchant who was looking at me with a dubious expression.

“It was a request. From a treasured partner.”

From that girl who is way too kind-hearted.

Ever since I first came across her, I had not tried to talk to her even once.

Until now, even though I could use magic that would let me talk to her, I couldn't bring myself to do so.

The reason is simple.

I was afraid. I didn't want to know what sort of things my broom would usually think about. I didn't want to imagine what sort of things that girl, who was my belonging, would think or what she would look like when given a human form.

That is why I never used that magic on any of my belongings.

“.....”

However, I am glad that I met her in that country overflowing with items.

I was very happy that she saved me.

Right now, I am very happy she is my broom.

“Alright, time for us to go.”

I thought that in my head, but didn't say it aloud.

I am a person, and she is an item.

We are not meant to be able to talk to each other.

However, I believe that my feelings will reach her.

I sat on my broom and kicked off from the ground.

As if responding to my call, the broom gently floated off the ground and flew into the sky.

The sight of the old country where merchants gathered in large numbers slowly faded away from sight, and a new world spread out before my eyes.

My job as a traveler, which was on hold for a few days, once again began in this manner.

Along with my precious belongings.

# Chapter 10

## A Tale of a Werewolf, Or Something Similar

I was hurriedly walking down a street at night.

I had only arrived in the country two days earlier. On the first day I simply walked around while sightseeing, on the second day I went around looking at the famous sightseeing spots within the country, and as for today, the third day, I had again been doing my best to cover all the sightseeing spots.

I had heard that there was a hill near the country where the view at night was very beautiful, so I left the country after sunset and then returned after night had fallen.

For those reasons, I was walking on a street at night that was illuminated by street lamps. While frequently rubbing my upper arms, and occasionally glancing backwards, I was quickly walking towards the inn where I had a room.

The streets at night were eerie. Although I had walked along the same road in the afternoon as well, at night its aspect changed completely and appeared more as a path that would lure you into another world.

A fog was hanging over the town as though invited by the deep darkness of the night, and visibility was poor. Due to the light cast by the street lamps, my shadow was unusually long and stretched out in front of me.

“.....Mumu.”

No, I was mistaken.

The shadow I saw in front of me was not my own. Even when I came to a sudden stop, the shadow was slowly moving through the darkness.

—There was something standing in front of me.

“.....Hello, who’s there?”

At some point, I had pulled out my staff and was pointing it in that direction.

The shadow reacted to my subtly trembling voice, wavered gently within the darkness, and came closer with tantalizing slowness.

I could hear the footsteps echoing.

Eventually, the shadow stepped into the light—

“Fuhahahaha! I am a werewolf, and I have been lying low in this country ever since a few days ago! It’s dangerous to walk around alone on the streets on a night like this, you know? You might get eaten up by a monster like me!”

I was shocked.

What appeared in front of me was indeed what he proclaimed.

A werewolf!

“.....”

It was a werewolf!

“.....”

A werewolf! He was there!

“Hey, what’s wrong? Too scared to even speak? Fufufu, that’s right. You should be scared.”

“.....”

I looked up at the werewolf in front of me.

“.....Ha.”

Incidentally, I also let out a sigh.

“Hey, hang on a second. Why are you sighing? I’m a werewolf, you know? A monster, you know? I’m going to eat you up, you know?”

“Ah, okay.”

“What sort of response is that?”

“I’m sorry. Despite your grand entrance from within the fog, your actual appearance is rather dull so I was just disappointed.”

“Disappointed? I’m a werewolf, you know? Do you not know what a werewolf is? It is a super famous name that is well known among all the monsters, you know?”

“Have you never looked at yourself in a mirror?”

“What!?”

“Out of concern for your well-being, I will tell you. However, in the first place, you are not a werewolf.”

“.....Then what am I?”

“A dogman.”

“Dogman, you say.”

“And what’s more, a chihuahua.”

“Wait. What is a chihuahua?”

“It is a type of dog that is said to be very cute.”

Right then, please try and imagine it.

What I saw in front of me was a creature with the face of a chihuahua and the body of a heavily muscled man. What’s more, his whole body was covered in dirty-looking tawny fur, and he spoke like a foppish older gentleman. But his face was that of a chihuahua’s.

Even if you took all manner of garbage and stewed it in a pot, it would be hard to replicate the same level of discomfort I felt upon seeing this creature.

What I saw before me was just that uncanny a spectacle.

Despite taking the effort to make a show of trembling in fear and preparing the perfect stage for an appearance, this is what I get? Seriously?

I am extremely angry.

“Moreover, what’s your deal? Why are you going around shouting that you’re a werewolf with a face like that? Are you an idiot? Are you a moron? There should be limit for not knowing your place, you simpleton.”

“.....Don’t you think you’re going a bit too far with the insults?”

“Anyway, sit down right there.”

“Ah, yes ma’am.”

I made him sit. I then realized that the werewolf (self-proclaimed) had also shifted into polite speech at some point.

By the way, the werewolf sat down on the ground with a huff and crossed his legs.

“Are you trying to look down on me? Sit down properly, on your knees.”

I kicked the werewolf on his knee.

The chihuahua man let out an adorable kyan! cry and switched to sitting on his knees. He then looked up at me with moist eyes. It’s making me angry.

“Besides, do you understand how most people would react if a monster with a face like yours suddenly appeared on a street at night?”

“They would be afraid.”

“No.”



I shook my head.

“They would probably laugh instead.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because only your face is cute. If you want to call yourself a werewolf then get some cosmetic surgery first.”

“You’ve been saying some really hurtful things for a while now.”

“That’s your fault.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

“.....”

Let’s get back to the topic at hand.

“Why are you even trying to frighten people in the first place?”

“You see, there are some very complex circumstances behind this—”

Saying so, the chihuahua man told me his sorrowful tale.

The chihuahua man was apparently born from the union of human and chihuahua parents. By the way, the father was human. You might be wondering how a child could possibly be born between a human and a dog, but in a world with magic, stupid things like this which can only be called miracles happen quite frequently. It’s actually quite troubling.

Back to the topic, the chihuahua man had been living with his parents deep in the mountains and far away from other people. Though, after reaching a certain age, he naturally reached puberty.

“I don’t want to live in this house anymore!”

One day, after a quarrel about pointless things, the chihuahua man decided to part ways with his parents. His father said, "Don't bother, you won't be able to live by yourself," and his mother said woof in a sad voice.

Despite that, he had climbed down from the mountain and come to this country. He decided to find employment here, but when he went to a restaurant people found him creepy, when he went to an inn people found him creepy, no matter where he went, people found him creepy. Forget about finding a job, there wasn't a place for him in this country in the first place.

Well, of course that would be the case. He's not a werewolf, he's a chihuahua man. He doesn't just get covered in fur during a full moon, his appearance is somewhere between that of a human's and a chihuahua's every single day.

Of course people would think he was creepy.

And because of that, he became sulky.

At this point I got bored and stopped listening to him, but apparently, those were his circumstances, and since he couldn't find a job, he called himself a werewolf and decided to attack people in the area and extort money from them, partially out of desperation.

By the way, I was apparently his first target.

"However, calling yourself a werewolf with that kind of appearance is too much of a stretch. Not a single person will be frightened of you. Please don't take werewolves lightly."

"Then what should I do?"

".....Huh?"

Wait, you're leaving it all up to me?

Oh well, I don't particularly mind.

"Right now, for the time being, let's do something about that face of yours that scores full marks for cuteness. It's because of that face that you can't be scary despite trying."

“But I have no money for cosmetic surgery...”

“That’s okay. You can still do something about it without money. For starters, shave off the fur. From your whole body.”

“But won’t I look even less like a werewolf if I shave off my fur?”

“You’re not a werewolf to begin with, so there shouldn’t be any problem with shaving off the fur, correct?”

“No, but still.....”

“There’s no need to worry. As long as you do what I say, you’ll be able to earn a huge amount of money in no time. It’s okay. You have potential.”

“I have potential...? Even though I’m not even a werewolf?”

“Yes, of course.”

I nodded.

“However, to make it work, you absolutely have to shave off your fur.”

“What should I do after shaving off my fur...?”

And then, I told him.

While showing a slightly wicked grin.

“Here’s what you should do...”

A few days later.

I was waiting for a certain man on the road at night, where the fog was accumulating.

“Hello there, Witch-san.”

He’s here. After shaving off all his fur, he had a fresh look.

“Hello. I’ve been waiting for you. How are the earnings lately?”

“Right, the earnings! It’s amazing! Just like you said, Witch-san, after shaving off the fur, everyone I meet on the streets at night has gone running away in fear!”

“Well, of course.”

A shaved chihuahua is pretty disgusting, after all.

“There were even people who threw their whole wallet at me and ran away when I said [Fuhahaha! Give me your money!] The streets have been completely taken over by my fearsome looks!”

“Well, of course.”

By the way, he was becoming quite famous. During my sightseeing trips, I often heard people saying things like “Some incredibly disgusting goblin-like creature is appearing on the streets at night. So scary.”

“At this rate, I don’t need to limit myself to just this country, I can expand my activities to other places as well—”

“Ah, that’s enough talking.”

I cut him off in the middle of his rambling and held out my palm towards him.

“You haven’t forgotten our promise, have you?”

“.....”

After giving me a complicated look for just a moment, he rummaged around in his pockets, and,

“Here you go. Twenty percent of today’s earnings.”

Saying so, he deposited a certain number of gold coins in my hand.  
Or rather, it was one gold coin.

So in one day, he obtained five gold coins.

That's a fairly large amount.

"Thank you."

"Still, you're amazing, Witch-san. I can't believe you came up with such a plan based on my appearance. Well, it's not easy to earn five gold coins in one day, and even though the idea certainly came from you, Witch-san, can I consider that this high rate of earning is due to my own talent!?"

"You're getting carried away."

"But it's the truth, isn't it? I guess I have the makings of a werewolf after all!"

"What a joke. If I felt like it, I could earn twice as much as you in a single day."

"Eh? How would you do that?"

"That's a secret."

Saying that, I carefully stashed away the gold coin in my purse.

"Hehehe... Now I'm really a full-grown werewolf..."

"Are you sure you're not just a renegade goblin?"

○

A few more days later.

A certain rumor was flying around the streets.

"Hey, did you hear about it?"

"I heard the goblin man appeared again."

"I don't want to be attacked by a goblin! I'm going back home!"

“What are you supposed to do if you’re attacked by the goblin?”

“I heard he lets you run away if you hand over your money.”

“What kind of goblin is that?”

“I don’t get it.”

“So basically, you’re safe if you walk around with enough money in your wallet?”

“I guess so.”

I see, his activities are the talk of the town, and people have also realized that he’s attacking them only because he’s after their money.

Instead of fear of the goblin man in question, there is a sense of discomfort and bewilderment spreading among the populace instead.

I suppose it’s almost time.

“Oh my, is something the matter, everyone? It looks like you have a problem.”

I put a fake smile on my face and approached a group of people who were talking about the goblin man.

Hearing that, the people looked at my attire and immediately told me about what was going on.

Having the title of Witch is very useful at times like these.

While kindly listening to their explanation, occasionally interjecting with sympathetic noises and making exaggerated reactions, I received a report of the circumstances which I already knew everything about, albeit from a different perspective.

And then, after they had talked about the goblin man for a while.

I looked at them and made a proposal.

“Oh my, that sounds terrible. By the way, I specialize in exterminating goblins, so

would you like to hire me to put down the goblin for you? For say, ten gold coins.”

# Chapter 11

## Long-standing Grief

Rostalf, also known as the Clocktower City, was a beautiful country located in a peaceful location on the plains.

The country had well-ordered tall buildings and a plaza in the center, and in the plaza was a large clock tower that towered over everything else. Just as that girl sat down on a bench in the plaza, the hands of the clock pointed straight up into the sky, and sound of the bells that rang out to indicate that it was twelve o'clock resounded throughout the country.

Frightened by the dignified sound of the bells that seemed to make everything within the country resonate, the distant birds took quick flight.

That girl blankly watched this scene.

She was a girl in the latter half of her teens, with ashen hair and azure eyes.

She was a witch, as well as a traveler.

It seemed the beautiful surroundings set her heart at ease, as the girl let out a deep sigh.

"I'm hungry..."

Oh, that wasn't the case.

Apparently, she was just hungry.

"I have no money..."

Also, it appeared that she was just short of money.

.....



Well, in any case.

Just who was that witch who was being tormented in such a manner by hunger and lack of money amid the beautiful scenery?

“.....”

That’s right, it’s me.

Unfortunately, it is me.

I feel like I’m about to cry.

Speaking of what had happened before I reached this point is no easy task.

In short, I wasn’t keeping a close enough eye on the contents of my purse. This happens all the time.

I kept thinking that I could earn some more money in the next country and putting it off, and when I came to this country, I went to see a play based on the [The Second District Serial Killer] that was said to be very popular, and on the way back, I stopped at a street-side bread seller to buy some bread while thinking that the play was really interesting, when I finally realized that I had spent far too much money.

A few copper coins had somehow managed to safely remain within my purse, but it was otherwise empty. In other words, the entry fee for the play was higher than I had anticipated.

For the above reasons, I was currently short of money.

“.....”

Well, that wasn’t as hard to explain as I thought it would be.

Also, the ending was quite self-centered.

Since I had no choice, I was walking around the plaza which had the clock tower in the center, searching for an opportunity to make a profit.

Apparently this country really likes [The Second District Serial Killer], as posters for the aforementioned play are pasted everywhere I look. Now that I think about it, I'm fairly sure that every seat was filled when I went to watch the play as well.

"Hey, did you see the play?"

"Yes, I did. The execution scene in the end was especially wonderful!"

"It's amazing how they showed such brutal death scenes!"

"I know what you mean!"

I wanted to know just what that person understood. Isn't it as simple as just feeling sympathy?

I resisted the impulse to hang around and hear more of the conversation.

The play that I watched earlier is another topic that is hard to talk about — I take that back, it's actually a rather straightforward play that depicts half the lifetime of a serial killer. It is one of those sob stories that are all too common. Although it has been dramatized, it seems to be roughly based on true events.

What kind of story is it, you ask? Well, it's something like this.

The story is set at a time about a decade ago.

There was a young girl by the name Selena. She used to live an ordinary life in an ordinary household.

However, one day, a robber forced his way into that ordinary household, and her parents who were at home ended up getting killed. Selena-san happened to be away from home by chance and hence her life was spared, however she had lost her parents.

That pitiful child ended up being taken in by her uncle.

However, she ended up receiving ill-treatment in that house. She was treated very badly by her uncle. Her heart turned dark and she started to hate people. She started to hate this wretched and irredeemable world.

Eventually, she gave form to her impulses and stabbed her uncle. Her uncle died. After that, she started to stray ever further from the proper path. She apparently had discovered great pleasure in killing people.

After that, she started killing people one after the other, and started to be known as [The Second District Serial Killer].

However, serial killers, like all other bad people, will eventually fall from grace.

Three years ago, she was captured by the genius young witch, the Witch of Lavender, Estelle, and was apparently executed.

And so, this country became peaceful.

All's well that ends well.

It was an exceedingly ordinary and mundane sad story of the birth of a villain and her subsequent fall.

".....Hmm."

However, it appears that serial killers, those beings who have strayed from the path of humanity, have a tendency to fascinate other people.

For example, when I went to a bookstore, I found a large number of people who were interested in books like the one that lists the various acts of Selena the serial killer, or perhaps a book going for a more controversial angle, such as [Perhaps the "Second District Serial Killer" was actually a good person?] which had a flashy sign board saying "Bestseller."

Well, you get the idea.

I really wonder why such things happen.

I decided to ask a middle-aged man (a salesperson) in the bookstore who was dusting off some books.

"I'm not sure about that either, but for better or worse, strange people who do things

with ease that normal people cannot do will easily draw the attention of people.”

“Oh?”

“That’s probably why those books sell so well.”

“I see.”

It was a strange feeling, like I understood what he wanted to say and yet did not understand.

By the way, he then asked me if I would like to purchase a copy, so I showed him the contents of my purse.

“If you’re just looking to waste my time, then please leave!”

He shouted at me. Yikes.

As if it was only natural, the Second District of Rostalf, the Country of Clocks, where the serial killer in question often carried out her murders became a place of immense successful business, as if it was some sort of holy land.

“Look! This is the hallowed ground where Selena carried out her murders!”

“Amazing! Ah, so this is one of the spots where she killed someone?”

“It definitely gives off the kind of aura that makes you think that someone was killed here!”

“Hey, let’s try lying down on the ground.”

“Amazing! I feel like I’m about to get killed!”

I was a little worried that all the people here were a little deranged. Are they really alright? That’s just ordinary ground over there.

I gave them a sorrowful look as I passed them by.

Despite the fact that she was an irredeemable villain, she was quite popular. I could

not understand it at all.

“.....”

Still, while I had only come this far because I was caught up in the moment, it appeared researching the activities of [The Second District Serial Killer] to try and find a chance to make a profit was the correct decision.

Among all the flyers of the play that were pasted in the alleyway, I noticed that there was just one that was different.

This is what it said:

[Recruiting magicians for ultra-short part-time work! A chance to earn a fortune!]

A fortune? Okay, that got my attention.

“.....Hmm.”

Furthermore, I was also interested in the person who was doing the recruiting.

[If you're interested, please come inside this house. (If you're just looking to waste my time, then please leave.)]

That was also written on the flyer.

There was also a signature on the flyer that looked like it was written by the person themselves.

The name Estelle, The Witch of Lavender, appeared as well. A name that I was familiar with.

○

Her house was well ordered. To put it in a positive light, it was a clean place. To put it in negative way, there was hardly anything in there. There were some lavender flowers growing near the window sill, but apart from those and the bare minimum of furniture, there was nothing else in the house.

“Welcome. Please take a seat over there”

Guided by Estelle-san, I took a seat on the sofa.

She brought out two belated cups of tea and then sat down opposite to me.

“Thank you.”

I gave a seated bow that made me look like I was peering at the cup of black tea that had been placed near me, and, “Well then, regarding the payment for the work...” I immediately got down to business.

“Instead of the details of the job, you’re more interested in the money...?”

After looking amazed, she gave me a tired smile.

“You look fairly young. How old are you?”

“I turned eighteen this year.”

“Hoho. And how old were you when you became a witch?”

“That would be when I was fourteen.”

“Ah. So you’re one year slower than me.”

“.....Out of curiosity, how old were you when you became an apprentice witch?”

“When I was around ten years old, I think.”

“So it took you three years to go from being an apprentice witch to a full-fledged witch?”

“Well, that’s how it is. By the way, I started serious magic training when I was eight, so it took me two years to become an apprentice witch, and three to become a full-fledged witch.”

“I became a full-fledged witch in one year. So you’re two years slower than me.”

“.....”

After a brief silence, I spoke.

“How old are you now?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Ah, you’re one year closer than me to being an old woman.”

“.....Hey, are you perhaps making fun of me?”

“Oh, not at all.”

After saying that, I immediately brought the conversation back on track.

“So, what kind of job is it? And I’d like more details about the payment as well.”

“.....It looks like you’re more interested in the payment after all, so let me start with that.”

Estelle-san placed a bundle on the table and slid it towards me. The contents of the bundle made a jangling sound from the force of her push.

An indication of a large amount of money.....!

I immediately opened up the bundle.

“.....”

Just as expected, it is a large amount of money. No, this might actually be more than I expected.

There were a large number of gold coins inside the bundle. There were too many of them for me to count. There were so many coins that I wouldn’t even be able to hold them all in both hands.

From a quick calculation, there was enough money here to live on for the next three years even if I did nothing but go from one wild party after another.

There was so much money that I sat there, mute with shock.

“That’s the bonus for completing the request. If you manage to properly carry out the job, I’ll give all of that to you.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious.”

“.....”

It was only natural that even I was thrown for a loop at this unprecedented amount of money.

“Umm, what kind of job must I carry out to earn such a large amount of money?”

“Hmm? Did I make you anxious, by any chance? Don’t worry. I just want you to come along with me, Elaina-san.”

“Go with you...? Where do you plan on going?”

“Here.”

Saying that, she pointed her finger downwards.

“Ah, inside the teacup?”

“No, further under it.”

“Meaning?”

“We are going to this country — to put it more precisely, I want to go back to the place this country was ten years ago.”

“Ten years ago...? Just why would you want to — more importantly, how are you planning on getting there?”

“You’ve suddenly started asking a lot of questions.”



She let out with a small chuckle.

“Ever since I started working in this country as a witch, I have been researching magic to find a way to go back ten years in time. I want to go back in time so that I can prevent that unhappy event from occurring. Hey, Elaina-san, do you know what was in this place ten years ago?”

“The same country, as it was ten years ago.”

“It’s not just that.”

“.....”

“Ten years ago, there was a certain child in this country. There was a girl who lived here, and she was still sane back then.”

And then, she told me that child’s name.

One again, it was a name that I was familiar with.

○

It turns out Estelle-san and Selena-san were actually friends as children.

They had been on good terms since they were very little, and other people used to say that they were like sisters. One of them was a genius magician. The other was just a regular girl. Viewing it that way, the two were not really alike, but in spite of that, the two of them were very close and the ability to use magic (or the lack thereof) did not affect their friendship in any way.

It was eleven years ago from now that these good friends were separated and were no longer able to see each other. It was one year before Selena-san’s parents were killed.

Estelle-san, who was overflowing with talent for magic despite her youth, had to leave the Clocktower City Rostalf behind and go to a different country to pursue her magical studies and become a witch.

After spending five years on her training, Estelle-san graduated from being a magician

to become a full-fledged witch.

Estelle-san's high aptitude for magic was naturally rated highly by the Clocktower City of Rostalf as well. When she became a witch and returned to her home country, she was asked by the King to "work for the betterment of this country as a State-affiliated witch." It was a great honor. She accepted his request without a second thought.

She wanted to share this happy news with her best friend, Selena-san, right away.

It was then that she found out that the girl who had once been her childhood friend had completely changed. She learned that in the period of five years that they hadn't met, her childhood friend had turned into a person who killed other people for pleasure.

Despite her sadness, Estelle-san tried several times to talk Selena-san out of it. However, her efforts were all in vain. Even though she lay in wait for Selena-san and tried to reason with her, Estelle-san's voice did not reach her. No matter what she said, Selena-san would only look upon even her once close friend as just another part of the world that she detested.

Ever since that time, whenever she found spare time between jobs, Estelle-san carried out research regarding a certain magic.

It was magic that would let her go back in time.

She wanted to go back in time and prevent the incident that caused Selena-san lose her sanity.

"It seemed she experienced many sad things in the time I wasn't here — so I want to be the one to save her."

That is what Estelle-san told me.

"Right after I came to this country, I saw a play that was based on the life of Selena-san, but..."

"In that case, I don't need to go into detailed explanations. Selena died three years ago. She's not here anymore."

“If I remember correctly, she was executed for her crimes.”

“That’s right. I was the one who carried out the sentence. Even though it took me three years to chase her down and capture her, even though it might have been possible to return her sanity, I was forced by the King and the citizens to kill her right away, and in the end, I removed her head from her shoulders.”

“.....”

“That is why, I want to go back and try again from the beginning.”

I can no longer bear to live in this world when she is no longer here — that is what Estelle-san said to me.

She said that with a scrunched up face while biting her lips.

I wetted my lips with the tea that had gone cold, as if to avoid looking at her pitiful expression, and then gave her my reply.

“I understand the circumstances. However, I don’t understand how you’re actually going to do this. Even if we managed to go back in time, why would you need my abilities once we are there?”

Hearing that, Estelle-san suddenly stood up from the sofa and went to open a door that was in the far end of the room. I could see that two chairs had been placed next to each other in the dimly-lit room on the other side of that door.

And behind those chairs, there was a large furnace.

“The magic that I have created is not that simple to use, and it was not something that I could create without sacrificing something.”

“.....You mean...”

“When a magician runs out of magical energy, they can sacrifice something to gain more magical energy, correct?”

“.....Yes. Well, you’re not wrong.”

For example, it could be their voice, or their memories.

By using such things that are a part of them as an advance payment of sorts, a magician can in return produce a massive amount of magical energy.

Since it is incredibly reckless — and besides, I have nothing that I feel so strongly about — I have never used this method.

“For the past five years, I have been continuously extracting my own blood. In addition to that, I have also been funneling every last bit of my existing magical energy into storage. It takes a mind-numbing amount of magical energy to go back ten years in time.”

“.....”

“However, even with my blood and the magical energy I have amassed, it is still not enough. I need just a little more.”

So that means...

“So you’re saying that once you go to the past you will be completely out of magical energy, so you want to have a witch accompany you for protection in case anything happens.”

“Hmm. You’re a little off the mark.”

Estelle-san took two rings out of her pocket.

“Elaina-san, you just have to wear this ring and go back in time with me. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Saying that, she gave me the ring.

It was a small ring set with a beautiful gemstone. It was just the right size to fit on my little finger.

“What is this?”

“I made it back when I was still in training, hoping it would make Selena happy. As

long as we are wearing these, we can share our magical energy. Back then, I thought that Selena would be able to use magic as well if we used these rings.”

“.....”

I slipped the ring on to my little finger.

“So you want me to wear this ring so that you will be able to use magic once we go back in time as well?”

“That’s right. If possible, I would like to meet that girl after she has regained her sanity without having to sacrifice anything else from my body.”

“.....I see.”

She nodded at my words and continued to speak.

“What do you say? Are you willing to take the job?”

She spoke, and asked me that question.

I responded to her question while extending the palm of my hand towards the ceiling and looking at the ring that glittered on my little finger.

“I am a little interested in what this country was like ten years ago.”

I am a traveler after all — that’s what I said.

The two of us sat side by side in the chairs placed in the dimly-lit room. I had more or less formed a vague guess about them, but apparently we would be able to go back in time by sitting in this chairs.

“Are you ready?”

Estelle-san looked at me while holding her staff in both hands. After seeing me nod, she said, “Well then, here we go—” and pointed her staff at the furnace that was behind us.

I saw that her hands were slightly trembling.

“.....Are you okay? Your hands are trembling.”

“I’m fine. This is due to anaemia.”

“You seem to sweating as well.”

“That’s because of anaemia as well.”

“.....Doesn’t that mean you’re actually not fine at all?”

“Even so, I’m still doing this. If I don’t do this now while I am still able to, I’ll easily lose this chance.”

“.....”

“Are you ready?” she again asked me.

“How about you, Estelle-san?”

“I’m ready. I have been ready for the past five years.”

She waved her staff and sent a pale blue light towards the furnace.

As soon as she did that, the door of the furnace popped open and a thick stream of energy with the same pale blue color twisted about like a snake as it flowed out. The stream of energy started to spin around in a circle with us at the center, and eventually we were enclosed inside a hemisphere of light.

My vision was filled with a strange light that seemed cold and yet warm.

As I was blankly watching this sight from my place upon the chair, Estelle-san said, “Ah, sorry. There’s one thing I forgot to say.”

“What is that?”

When I looked at her with a puzzled expression, she closed her eyes, saying just that.

“Thank you.”

Seeing that, I let out a laugh.

“You’re welcome.”

○

I woke up to the clamor of ringing bells.

Apparently, I had fallen into a deep sleep.

What I saw before me was a view that had little changed from what I saw earlier. For better or worse, it was just a room without anything in it.

Did we actually go back ten years in time? I only remember being released from inside the hemisphere of light.

“It looks like it was a success.”

However, unlike me who had doubts, she seemed to be fairly sure of the result.

“Look, Elaina-san. The room is back to looking like it did ten years ago.”

“I’m sorry, but I see no difference.”

“It’s completely different. Like this bit, that bit, and that bit over there.”

“It all looks exactly the same to me.”

“To me, it looks entirely different.”

Well, she has been looking at this room for a long time, so I guess that is only natural. Unless you’ve been looking at it every day, you wouldn’t be able to see any difference.

“At any rate, since I’m seeing it for the first time, I see no difference.”

“In that case, let’s go outside and confirm it.”

Estelle-san’s light purple hair gently waved as she stood up from her chair and headed

out of the house.

I followed her out of the house and shut the main door behind me.

“Hmm.”

Well, there was nothing left to say on the matter.

“You’re right, it does look a little different.”

Outside Estelle-san’s house — in the alleyway, to be exact, there was supposed to be a depressing number of flyers about that play pasted on the walls, but right now I couldn’t see a single one.

It wasn’t just that. Although the view of the surroundings was pretty much the same, there were some areas that were strangely at odds with what I remembered.

For example, the shop that had tables outside spilling over into the alleyway had a different name. Also, the flowers blooming near the window of the house had a different color.

The view of the surroundings that I saw now had accumulated a number of such small changes.

The clock tower that I could see rising up behind the houses was the same as when I had been blanky gazing at it earlier, just continuing to mark the passage of time. The sound of the bells that signified that it was five o’clock reverberated in my ears.

After following my gaze, Estelle-san said, “Our time limit is one hour. When we hear the sound of the bells for six o’clock, we will be returned to the future, ten years from now.”

“We can only stay for one hour?”

“With my magical energy, staying for one hour after traveling ten years into the past is the limit. However, that should be more than enough.”

And then she said, “As long as I have that much time, I can easily wipe away what is going to happen in the next ten years.”



While we walked in the alley, Estelle-san opened a memo pad.

“The robber should attack Selena’s house twenty minutes from now. So let’s go over there and stop him.”

“What is that memo pad for?”

“I worked for the country, after all. By making full use of my authority, I was able to collect a number of facts about that incident.”

“Hoh.”

“I’ve compiled all the information I could find regarding that time, including eyewitness reports, in this memo pad. In about twenty minutes, a degenerate wearing a black cloak will apparently force his way into Selena’s house. Once he’s there, he will slaughter her parents and then proceed to strip the house of all its valuables.”

“I see.”

“If we ambush that degenerate before he reaches the house, then the entire issue will be settled.”

“You mean to drive him away?”

“Of course. That’s why I came here.”

Estelle-san gave a big nod.

“If Selena’s parents didn’t die, then I’m sure her life would not have been messed up so badly.”

“I see.”

If the root cause of the whole issue is removed, would that mean that all the people who were killed by Selena-san would also return?

Should that happen, I wonder what effect that will have on the future. By just preventing the birth of one serial killer, I wonder how much the future would have

changed once we return?

At the very least, that play will no longer exist.

While I was deep in thought, Estelle-san spoke to me in a disinterested manner.

“Well, no matter what I change here in the past, it will have no effect on the future that we return to.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

“Basically, even if we interfere here in Selena’s past, the future where I killed her will not change. I went through a lot of literature when I was researching magic to travel back in time, but every person who managed to create magic to travel back in time said the same thing. They said, [Even though I returned to the past, it didn’t change anything.]”

“.....”

Although only a little, I have also looked into magic that allows people to travel back in time. Depending on how you look at it, the magic that I use to heal wounds can also be considered a variant of such magic, after all.

“So, you’re saying that even if you change the past, something else will occur that will cause the same outcome in the end?”

It is said that all things will end as they were meant to, so no matter what you do, even if you change the past, you will still end up with the same result in the end?

However, she shook her head, causing her light purple hair to sway.

“That’s not it. In the first place, we will not even be able to confirm if the past was changed. Our past has already been set in stone, after all, and there is no way to change it.”

“Ummm... I’m sorry, but I don’t understand it at all.”

I’m frowning so hard that there are wrinkles all over my forehead.

Estelle-san let out a long breath as if she was annoyed.

“Okay, then let me put it in simple terms. Let us call the world that we have lived in so far as ‘A.’ The ten years of past that have already occurred in that world are fixed and there is nothing we can do to change that. I mean, that future exists only because we didn’t interfere in its past.”

“In that case, what exactly is this past that we have traveled to?”

“I suppose we should call it the past that we can affect. Let us assume that this world is called ‘B.’ The two of us are originally from world ‘A,’ ten years in the future. However, the past that we traveled to belongs to the world ‘B.’ And when we return, we will go back to world ‘A,’ which is where we came from.”

“.....”

“In other words, no matter what we do in this world, we will not have any indication of it in our world.”

After that explanation, I finally understood what she was driving at.

However, in that case...

“So no matter what you do, the past can’t be changed?”

“That’s right.”

She nodded to show that I was right.

“Umm, this might be really rude, but in that case, does what we are doing now have any meaning?”

“That really is a rude thing to say...”

“If your theory is right, then that’s the obvious conclusion.”

What was the point of changing the past, if it had no effect on the future?

That would be the same as thoughtlessly and carelessly winding time back, and I feel

that it achieves nothing more than to pointlessly increases the despair of living in a world that cannot be saved.

However.

In spite of my uneasiness, she shook her head.

“It is not meaningless. After all, doing this will at least make me feel better.”

And then, she said, “Just thinking that there is a future where that girl can be saved is more than enough to make me feel better.”

○

After that, the two of us walked for a while, observing all the things that were different between now and the future.

—That house over there is running a bakery, but in the future that shop no longer exists. Apparently, the owner’s wife ran away with someone.

—See that child doing practice swings with a sword over there? In the future, he will grow up to be a splendid soldier. It looks like he dreamed of being a soldier from when he was this young.

Estelle-san talked about such things with a happy expression, and I watched her from the side as we continued to walk.

“By the way, we’re nearly at Selena’s house—”

Estelle-san cut her sentence off in the middle and suddenly stopped in her tracks.

When I looked back to see what was the matter with her, I saw Estelle-san standing with her eyes widened and mouth agape, staring blankly.

Her gaze was directed toward the opposite side of the alley that we had just stepped into a moment ago.

“.....? What’s wrong?”

I craned my neck and looked in the same direction as her.

There was a single girl there.

It was a girl in her teens, with long hair the same color as my azure eyes. It appeared that she was on her way back home from shopping, as both her hands were full of bags.

“Selena.....!”

Estelle-san called that girl by that name. She called her name out in a hoarse voice as if it took a great effort to wring out that word, and in the next instant she had run up to that girl, fell to her knees in the alley, and was gently embracing her.

“Eh...? Wha... Miss, who are you? You’re scaring me.”

The girl had her eyes widened at this sudden turn of events. She was obviously frightened.

“Selena. It has been so long. I’m so sorry. Even though you were going through such scary experiences, I wasn’t there to save you. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Umm... Miss, who are you...”

“Just wait a little longer, I will definitely save you.”

“.....Are you a recruiter for some new religion or something, Miss?”

Despite her age, Selena-san had a good head on her shoulders.

After letting go of Selena-san who was looking at her with obvious suspicion, Estelle-san said, “Hmm. I guess that was strange. Sorry.”

“Not ‘was,’ the strangeness is in present continuous tense.”

“I’m really sorry. I just wanted to give you a hug.”

“.....Are you some new kind of pervert or something, Miss?”

“No, I’m a person from the future.”

“Hee.”

Selena-san pretended to be astonished, and told a lie to quickly escape the current conversation.

“By the way, I’m busy right now so I have to go. I don’t have time to talk to you.”

“...I understand. Sorry.”

After being coldly rebuffed, Estelle-san furrowed her eyebrows while looking a little lonely, and moved away from her.

After being freed from Estelle-san, Selena-san looked back multiple time to ensure that the strange lady who had appeared out of nowhere was not following her as she walked out of the alley.

“.....Just wait a little longer, Selena.”

Estelle-san muttered those words to herself. I felt like an unshakeable resolve was contained within those words.

“It looks like she turned you away quite harshly.”

“She was always like that. However, despite her manner of speech, she’s a very kind girl deep down.”

We used to see each other every day when we were children, so I know that to be a fact — that’s what Estelle-san said to me while looking in the direction that Selena-san had gone.

Her gaze was overflowing with kindness.

○

After reaching Selena-san’s house, the two of us immediately put our plan to save her parents into action.

The plan went as follows.

To begin with, Estelle-san knocked on the door of the house.

“Who’s there?”

Saying that, Selena-san’s father opened the door and showed himself.

“Hey there. I’m Estelle’s sister, although we have different mothers.”

“Ah. It true, you look a lot like Estelle-chan. But what do you mean, you have different mothers?”

“Well, let’s just set that matter aside for now.”

“Is it really okay to put that aside?”

“It’s fine. More importantly, I have a message from the two of them. Would you like to hear it?”

“Very well... What is it?”

“There is something important she wants to do concerning Estelle, and so she wants you two to come over right away.”

“What is this important thing?”

“No idea. I’m not sure about that either.”

“You came all this way to deliver a message that you don’t understand?”

“Well, that’s how it is. In any case, it seems to be something important, so please come with me right away.”

“.....Hmm. I wonder what it is.”

In that way, it was a plan to get Selena-san’s parents out of the house.

And the plan succeeded admirably.

The plan from here on out is extremely simple. Taking advantage of the time when Selena-san's parents were getting ready to go out, Estelle-san whispered it to me in secret.

"Elaina-san, please wait inside Selena's house. I'll give you this memo pad, so please read it carefully and make sure you prepare for what is about to happen."

"And what will you be doing, Estelle-san?"

"I will keep watch over Selena's Papa and Mama. I have no idea what will happen by changing their fate. I have to protect them."

"....."

In other words, the troublesome part of the work was pushed to me.

And so.

I was one in Selena-san's house, waiting for the robber to show up.

To kill the time, I was blankly look through the memo pad that Estelle-san had left behind, while listlessly waiting for the time to come.

".....I see."

Estelle-san's memo pad contained information about the incident that occurred ten years ago — which is to say, now — in minute detail.

The incident is supposed to happen a few minutes from now.

A degenerate wearing a black cloak will boldly enter through the front door and kill Selena-san's parents, after which he will proceed to steal every single item of worth from the house and make his escape. Apparently, Selena-san was from a fairly wealthy family, which was why her house was targeted.

True enough, even in the closet I was currently hiding in, I could see a number of expensive-looking clothes. The dining room that I could see through the slight opening in the closet door was also exceptionally beautiful, and had been decorated with a



number of over-the-top gold ornaments.

I see, so it was one of those robberies for money that were fairly common.

“.....”

However, there is one point about this incident that makes me feel uneasy.

Apparently, both of Selena-san’s parents had been stabbed repeatedly by a sharp blade. They died after receiving dozens of wounds in different parts of their bodies.

It seems like an excessively violent act for a mere robber. It appears that Estelle-san also felt that this was strange, as she had written down the following sentence at the end.

[There is a chance that the robber had some sort of grudge. The robber was not after the valuables, but actually her parents?]

I see, in that case I can understand why Estelle-san went along with them as a guard. She left me behind here because she was unable to entirely discard the possibility that the robber was just an ordinary robber.

“.....Hmm.”

And now, it appeared that the possibility she didn’t want to discard could be discarded entirely.

The ring that I was wearing on my little finger started to glow, and a pale blue light extended out and away from closet.

I felt the sensation of magical energy being sucked of my body.

In other words.

Estelle-san is using magic.

Most likely, Estelle-san is currently confronting the robber.

Despite her flaws, Estelle-san is still a witch.

She is a genius who was able to find a way to go back ten years in time.

Would a mere robber give her any trouble? I can't help but think that the fight will be over before it even begins.

If the information we have regarding the attack on Selena-san's parents is true, then there is only one perpetrator. Even if he is armed with a blade, there is no way he will be able to put up a fight against her.

Due to these reasons, I was very relaxed.

I walked in a carefree manner through the city illuminated by the setting sun, and followed the thin stream of pale blue light that extended from the ring on my finger.

I don't want any trouble, so it would be nice if everything was settled by the time I reached her.

—I suppose that was too optimistic.

“.....”

However.

When I reached the place I was heading to...

I reached there just as the ring stopped emitting the stream of magical energy.

I had just turned into a dimly-lit back alley with a number of trash cans lined up on one side.

I was immediately forced to accept that all of my preconceptions were flawed.

The two of us were mistaken about everything, right from the start.

“.....”

Both Estelle-san and I had misread the situation completely.

“—Ah, you were with this woman earlier, weren’t you, Miss? Aah, this could be a problem.”

She had not lost her sanity after her parents were killed.

“What should I do about this? Maybe I’ll just kill you too.”

If she had been insane to begin with, and just acted normal in public, then there was no way to tell that she was actually insane even if they met everyday.

“I can’t let you live now that you’ve seen me, you know?”

That young girl was standing with a twisted smile on her face in the back alley where even the slanted rays of light from the setting sun could not reach, and looked over at me.

She was holding a knife in her hands, and her face and clothes were splattered with blood. That young girl who was drenched in the blood of the three people who lay at her feet was dyed in a deep red color from head to toe.

“Sorry, but won’t you die for me as well, Miss?”

That young girl was the same one we had happened across just a little while ago.

It was Selena-san herself.

○

It was easy enough to guess what had happened before I got here.

Estelle-san was on the lookout for a robber dressed in a black cloak. Of course she would not have her guard up against Selena-san, who appeared before her without even bothering to disguise herself.

“This person was saying some strange things about having come here from the future. Are you also the same as her, Miss?”

It is likely that Selena-san had understood something when she had been hugged by Estelle-san earlier.

“.....What would you do if I said that I was?”

“I don’t particularly care, I guess. Either way, I need to erase any witnesses.”

“.....”

“This person is wearing a witch’s brooch, so I was on my guard thinking that she would be incredibly strong, but she was unexpectedly nothing special. She was a weakling. It was way too easy.”

She was talking while directing an unbelievably cold gaze at Estelle-san who lay at her feet.

“.....Why did you kill your own parents?”

Hearing my question, Selena-san replied without changing her expression even a little bit.

“To tell you the truth, my parents had been mistreating me. So I killed them. Hey, do you think I’ll be forgiven for this?”

“.....”

“Since the day I was born, I was raised while my father constantly tormented me and my mother constantly scolded me. My father only ever looked at me with lustful eyes, and my mother always saw me as another woman and felt jealous. Despite that, we acted as a perfect family in public. We were that sort of warped family.”

“.....”

“Since they were already broken, I just finished the job.”

The girl had a bright smile on her face.

It was not a cute smile befitting a girl her age, that smile was an incredibly twisted and

repulsive.

Selena-san slowly walked towards me.

“—You gave me a scare. The two of you showed up with unbelievable timing to wreck my plan, after all. ”

“By plan, do you mean putting on a black cloak and pretending to be a robber?”

“That’s right. As I thought, you’re well-informed. Is it because you’re from the future?”

Even though the appointed time had passed, no robber had turned up at Selena-san’s house. That was probably because the person who was supposed to come into the house as a burglar had gone somewhere else instead.

.....

The bags that Selena-san had been carrying earlier when we happened across her were strewn about on the ground.

I could see some black fabric sticking out of one of the bags.

“Hey Miss, if you are really from the future, would you mind telling me something? What kind of person am I in the future?”

“I am a traveler. I haven’t been in this country for very long, so I don’t know what kind of person you turned into.”

I pulled out my staff and stood ready.

“Actually, in the future ten years hence where I come from, you were already dead.”

“Eh? I was killed? By whom?”

“By your best friend.”

“Eh? But I don’t have any friends, you know?”

“.....”

“Oh wait, are you talking about Estelle?”

Seeing me nod, Selena san clapped her hands while looking extremely happy.

“Ah. I see, I see. Now I get it. This dead woman here is Estelle from ten years in the future, right?”

“.....”

“I knew it! That’s what I thought.”

I didn’t answer her, but she probably took my silence as affirmation. While clapping her hands in enthusiasm, she said, “But why did she kill me?”

She tilted her head in confusion.

“It was because you became a mass murderer.”

“Me? A mass murderer?”

“Well, yes.”

The Second District Serial Killer.

That is what she was called in the future.

Ironically enough, we were presently still in the second district. In the end, Estelle-san and I were unable to prevent the birth of the serial killer.

.....

No, instead of saying that we weren’t able to prevent it, I should probably say that were already too late to do anything about it.

“I see, I turned into a mass murderer. I suppose that makes sense.”

Going back ten years was not enough, Selena-san had already been broken long before this.

Pointing the knife in her hand at me, Selena-san kicked the ground and ran towards me.

“I mean, killing people is so much fun!”

She ran at me while saying that.

“.....!”

I had also raised my staff towards the girl who was running towards me, when it happened.

The trash cans that were lying on the ground suddenly attacked Selena-san from the side and pinned her to the wall. They flew at her one after the other, spilling their rotting contents and releasing a smell while crashing into Selena-san.

“.....I won't forgive you.”

From the other side of the rising stink, I heard a low voice.

Holding her staff in one trembling hand and using the other to support her abdomen that was still leaking blood, Estelle-san was standing up.

Despite being in a horrible condition of being wounded all over her body, she was still alive.

“Aha.”

Standing in the middle of the rotting garbage, Selena-san looked at Estelle-san.

“What, you're still alive? Maybe I should have stabbed you harder—”

Estelle-san didn't let her finish her sentence. She swung her staff as if to interrupt her words, and a pale blue mass of magical energy sped sped towards Selena-san relentlessly like a bullet.

The ring on my finger began to shine so bright that it was almost blinding.

“Aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!”

Estelle-san screamed as she swung her staff again and again.

“Ahahahaha! It hurts! It hurts!”

Selena-san was still laughing, even after being pelted with spheres of magical energy.

“You were deceiving me all along? Making a fool of me all along? Even though I thought we were friends!”

“Ahaha! Estelle is trying to kill me! Ahahahahaha”

“I thought we were friends! I thought you could go back to being a good girl! All this time — all this time you were just deceiving me!? Say something!”

“Ahahahaha! It hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Ahahahaha!”

“You — monster...!”





And then, Estelle-san stopped moving, with her staff still pointed at Selena-san.

The pale blue light emitted from the staff extended towards Selena-san like a stream of smoke, wrapped around her neck, and started to constrict.

“Hahahahaha! Hahaha! Ha—”

Her staff steadily moved to point upwards, and Selena-san, who had collapsed onto the ground, started to float into the air.

“—Haha, haha.”

The repulsive laughter little by little lost its vigor, and started to wither away.

However.

Even while struggling to grasp the smoke around her neck that couldn't be touched, even while she was frothing at the mouth, Selena-san's smile did not disappear from her face.

While looking down towards Estelle-san who was standing below her, she was definitely smiling.

“—You murderer,” Selena-san whispered.

“.....”

Her back suddenly straightened.

At this point, the horrifying sight that I saw before me could only come to the worst possible end.

“Estelle-san, please wait. Stop, this is—”

This is very wrong.

Even if opponent was a mass murderer, would anyone wish for such an ending?

I immediately put my hand on the ring. If I pulled it off, our magical energy would no

longer be shared. At the very least, I can stop Estelle-san from becoming a murderer.

If I do that, then—

What should I do after that? What sort of ending should I give to this sorrowful tale?

.....

I wonder if it was because of my hesitation. The ring on my little finger seemed to be fixed in place and showed no signs of coming off.

What's more, my hand started to tremble and I found it hard to even get a grip on the ring.

Apparently, I was more afraid of being in this place than I thought.

While I was wasting time, Selena-san's fading laugh turned into a cry of pain, and her hands that were on her neck started to flail around.

Her cries of agony just increased my sense of desperation.

It took me several, long seconds of agony to remove the ring that was feeding a continuous stream of magical energy to Estelle-san.

After bouncing on the ground that was drenched in blood, the ring drew a red arc in the air before finally coming to rest.

"Estelle-san, stop this. This is wrong. You can't—"

I immediately tried to persuade her.

I tried to get her to reconsider what she was doing.

However the smoke that was strangling Selena-san did not disappear.

"I don't need any memories of you. I don't need any of it. They should all just disappear, along with you!"

The ring was indeed no longer on my finger. I had stopped supplying her with magic.

Just where was this magical energy coming from?

“I should have never tried to save you. I should have never looked back. I should have never lamented your death.”

Her eyes, brimming with resentment, looked similar to Selena-san’s eyes.

At a loss for what to do, all I could do was to stand there blankly with my staff gripped in my trembling hand.

My confusion and fear bound me hand and foot, and kept me immobile in that place.

“Goodbye, Selena.”

And then—

It happened just as Estelle-san, whose face was set in a twisted expression like she had given up on everything, whispered those words.

—the bell began to ring.

The ringing of the bell announced that exactly one hour had passed since we came here, and both Estelle-san and I started to be enclosed in a cocoon of light. The view of the surroundings started to blur, and eventually disappeared altogether.

We were out of time.

The smell of blood, and the sounds of the girl being strangled also disappeared.

Everything before me dissolved into a vague, white color.

And then.

In this way, the tale of going back to save a single girl ended with not a single person being saved in the end.

The sound of the bells was still echoing.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself back in the original world — the world she had called ‘A,’ or in other words, the world we originally came from.

Everything I saw before me looked familiar. The empty room. Two chairs lined up next to each other. Lavender flowers growing near the window.

And next to me, was Estelle-san.

“.....”

She was staring at the ceiling with a blank expression. She was in a daze, with an expressionless face.

I didn’t know what she was thinking, or what I should say to her.

I just waited there as the time continued to pass.

“...Hmm? What was I doing?”

After a while, she finally opened her mouth.

“Why am I sitting in a place like this...? Hmm? I can’t remember.”

“.....Estelle-san.”

“Ah. You are... Elaina-san, right? What exactly was I doing until now?”

“.....”

I wasn’t able to answer her.

“I feel like I’ve forgotten something important... someone important... What’s going on? I can’t remember. What was it again?”

“.....”

I spoke up.

“Don’t you remember anything about Selena-san?”

“Hmm? Who’s that?”

She had forgotten it all.

By the time she returned to the future, she had forgotten about everything that had happened ten years ago, even the fact that she had traveled back in time.

As we spoke, I understood what had happened. At that time — by the time I had removed the ring, she had already started to generate magical energy by herself using a reckless method.

She had gone and converted all her precious memories of her best friend into magical energy. She had thrown away the memories that formed such a large part of her personality.

After returning to the future, all she did was stare blankly into space. She had become wholly apathetic.

“I can’t seem to remember it at all... My head feels really fuzzy. Did you say Selena.....? Who was that?”

She just looked more and more confused as she continued to think.

“Elaina-san, I can’t seem to remember her at all. What was her relation to me?”

She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

I stood up as if avoiding her gaze, and gave a short reply.

“No relation. Not anymore, at least.”

The country had well-ordered tall buildings and a plaza in the center, and in the plaza was a large clock tower that towered over everything else.

While I was passing through the plaza, the clock struck three o'clock and the bell rang out.

Looking back, I blankly stared at that sight.

“.....”

In the end, I left that house as though I was running away. Of course, I didn't receive the payment. There was no way I could accept money from her for the work we did in the past, when that past had ceased to exist for her.

And besides, even though I went to the past with her, I didn't do anything that would deserve a reward.

And moreover.

Thinking that people would definitely be able to live happily if they could turn back time and redo their past, that was an extremely careless way of thinking.

Perhaps, even if you can look back on time that has already gone by, trying to redo it is wrong. Going back in time to change the relationships between people is on an entirely different scale from using magic to manipulate the bodies of people to heal their wounds.

However, even with that being the case, I was far too helpless in that world.

I was frightened.

I was overwhelmed by the despair, and the tragic sight of a person being killed before my eyes.

I think that perhaps my senses were numbed because I had been traveling for such a long time.

I am a witch, and a traveler. That's all I am. I am not capable of doing everything by myself, or handling all problems with competence.

After traveling to the past, I was reminded of how inexperienced I am.

It was made painfully clear.

“.....”

Lukewarm tears ran down my face.

I had started to cry before realizing it, and I stared up at the clock tower, as if to avoid looking at myself.

The echoes of the bell had faded away, and the clock tower stood there as always, just marking the passage of time.

It relentless moved ahead, marking the passage of time without ever looking back.

“.....I suppose I should get going.”

And so, I started to walk again.

I took one step at a time, without ever looking back.



# Chapter 12

## The Wall Inscribed by Travelers

Apparently, the people in the left half of a certain country were on bad terms with the people on the right half, so they had built a wall running through the middle and decided not to have any dealings with each other.

Of course, the wall was already in place when I arrived at the left side of the country, and just like the other side of the country that rejected this side, the neatly maintained ash-grey wall stood there boldly while also giving off a cold feeling.

When I touched it, I found that it was pleasantly cool

“No matter how I look at it, it is dull. It’s very dull. This is the worst.”

While I was killing time by rubbing my cheek up against the wall, a government official from the left side of the country came up behind me whilst grumbling that.

While keeping my cheek pressed against the wall, I asked him “What is the matter?” with a puzzled expression.

“Just what are you doing over there...”

The official looked at me with an exasperated expression and said,

“You see, the right side and left side of this country are on very bad terms, to the extent that we each wish for the people on the other side to go to hell, but take a look at this. Don’t you think this wall is a little too dull to be the separator between this side and the other side?”

“...? What do you mean by dull?”

After I heard what he had to say, I nodded to myself as his logic was satisfactory. Moreover, it seemed that the left side and the right side could also not endure the thought of losing to each other.

Both this side of the wall and the other side were the same dull grey color, but this was exactly the reason why the official was drowning in despair.

There was no doubt that this side of the wall was clearly superior to the other side. However, there was no clear evidence to prove that this side was superior.

In short, what the official was trying to say was,

“Look at this wall. This wall itself is the absolute proof that this side is superior to the other side — We want something we can boast about like that.”

Apparently, that was the situation. Well, that’s simple and straightforward. A truly easy to understand problem.

It was a problem quite suitable for the people of this country who raised up a grey wall despite their burning desire to clearly delineate everything into either black or white.

“I hear that you are a traveling witch. Do you have any good ideas?”

Without missing a beat, the official threw that question to me.

“.....”

I let out a groan after keeping my cheek pressed against the wall for a little while longer.

After letting out the groan, saying “Well, it’s not like I don’t have any ideas at all,” I made him an offer.

Incidentally, the people of this country had a tendency to want to clearly delineate and classify everything in a proper category, but this trait was also shared by the people on the other side of the wall.

“Hey there. I hear you’re a traveling witch. By the way, take a look at this wall. Don’t you think it is a rather selfish thing? Actually, there is something I’d like your opinion about.”

I had gone to the other side of the wall — in other words, the right side of the country,

and just as I had done on the other side, I had my cheek pressed up against the wall.

A government official from the right side of the country came up to me and, as expected, he made the same request of me as the official from the left side.

I groaned again in the exact same way as I did previously, pretended to think about it for a while, and made an offer to this side as well.

“Well, it’s not like I don’t have any ideas at all.”

After saying that, the official was extremely happy, and shouted, “Is that true!?” with his eyes sparkling.

“Yes, it’s not like I don’t have any ideas. However, there is one condition — Official-san, do you have a knife?”

“Hmm? Aah, I do have one, but...”

The official gave me the knife he wore at his waist, while looking at me suspiciously.

“What do you intend to do with that?”

Saying “This is what I wanted to do,” I stabbed the knife into the surface of the wall.

With a scratching and scraping sound, I started carving shapes into the wall.

Just what is this girl planning to do?

As the official was furrowing his eyebrows and thinking that, I had finished carving a sentence into the wall.

[This side of the wall is a very nice place.  
—A traveling Witch]

“.....What is this?”

The official was continuing to furrow his eyebrows. It looked like he was slow on the uptake.

“In short, while this wall acts like a symbol to separate this side of the country from the other side, it also serves to prove how wonderful this side is, right? So you should just have visiting travelers carve their impressions into the wall like I just did. The more inscriptions you have, the more it will serve to show how wonderful this side of the wall is.”

“Hmm... But I can’t really say that I like such an approach very much...”

As he said this, the official from the right side of the country deepend his frown, forming a crease in between his eyebrows.

I actually gave a good idea because he came to me and asked, but this is the response I get.

While resisting the urge to droop my shoulders in disgust, I acted like I suddenly remembered something and said, “Ah, I forgot to mention something.”

I used a certain magical phrase on him.

“The other side of the wall already has many such inscriptions on it.”

I heard about this later, but after I left that country, it apparently became a custom to give every visiting traveler a knife and have them carve a sentence into the wall.

However, I wonder why it is that the citizens of that country belonging to the different halves are constantly in conflict, but on just the single matter of continuing that conflict, their opinions matched so well.

The above was an excerpt from Volume 5 of [The Adventures of Nike]



It had not been very long since she had become an apprentice witch when that girl visited that country along with her teacher

Her teacher spoke, as though she had just remembered something.

“Ah, by the way, that country has really delicious food. Aaah... I want to eat some delicious food... Well then, let’s go. To that country.”

This was the main cause of the entire incident.

At her sudden proposal, the girl wondered what this person was talking about all of a sudden, but it wasn't like she had any particular place she wanted to go instead.

And so, the girl nodded to her teacher's sudden proposal, and prepared to go there along with her teacher. However, since it was her teacher who had proposed this plan, she used the fact that she was being pushed around on short notice as an excuse, and said, "Ah, if you're going to treat me to some food, then I'll go," and received a slightly displeased expression in return.

And so, after several days of flying on their brooms over grasslands, they reached that country.

Just as her teacher had said, the food in that country was so delicious it felt like your cheeks would melt.

What her teacher had failed to mention, however, was that there was a large wall that ran through the center of the country, dividing it into two parts.

"....."

"....."

The two of us looked up at that wall.

One of them was a youthful witch with ashen hair. She was probably somewhere in her mid twenties.

The other one was that witch's disciple. She was an apprentice witch with beautiful long hair as black as night.

Right then, now for the real issue at hand.

That girl — the apprentice mage.

Who was that girl who was always being pushed around by her teacher, while her desire to become a full-fledged witch only grew stronger with each passing day?

Please answer the question in no more or less than four letters.

...Alright, time's up. Right then, let's compare answers.

Who was that girl?

The correct answer is...

"Fran."

That is the answer.

Hearing my teacher call my name, I turned around.

"What is it, Sensei?"

"Take a look at this wall. Isn't it amazing?"

My teacher's voice was slightly excited.

"Haven't you already visited this country before?"

When I asked that question, my teacher slumped her shoulders as if she wanted to say Aah, this kid doesn't get it at all.

"I'm saying that it has become a lot more impressive since the last time I was here."

On the wall were a number of — an innumerable number of — inscriptions carved into it. There were things like:

[This country is the best!], [This is the best country I've seen in my life!], [The two of us are going to get married soon], and [We, partners in travel, will live on forever] and other completely unrelated words carved into it. In this way, there were traces from all sorts of travelers carving their inscriptions into the wall.

Apparently when my teacher was last here, the wall was completely plain.

When I replied with a "Oh, is that so?", she said in an even more boastful manner, "Do

you know who started the practice of carving sentences into this wall? That's right, it was me."

I didn't really understand what she said, so I ignored her.

"But what is the point of this? Is there any meaning to carving sentences into the wall?"

"There's no real meaning behind it. The people of this country just like to compete with the opposite side. They want some way to prove that they are better than the people on the opposite side. So that's why people who visit this side and think that it is a nice place will leave a message on this side of the wall. Similarly, people who visit the opposite side and think that it is a nice place will leave a message on the opposite side of the wall."

"Fumu fumu..."

So putting it frankly, it is a kind of popularity contest.

I see.

However, if it is a popularity contest, there is something that I'm curious about.

I tugged on my teacher's sleeve and asked, "So, which side is currently on top?"

"Oh, you want to know which side is more popular?"

"Isn't that only natural? It's obvious that the more popular side will have better food."

After a brief silence, "..... Eh? You're still going to eat?"

My teacher once again made a slightly displeased expression.

Although this might be presumptuous of me, I would like to announce the results of looking at that ash-grey wall from both sides.

The answer is...

"They're both pretty much the same."

The number and type of sentences were the same, and they were similarly laid out on both sides of the wall.

There were small differences, like instead of [The two of us are going to get married soon], there were things like [Screw this, I want a divorce!] carved into the wall, and instead of [We, partners in travel, will live on forever], I saw [Screw this, I'm leaving this group!] However it was basically the same.

In other words, it was not possible to use the wall alone to measure the difference between the two sides.

“Well, maybe the difference between the two sides lies in how they prepare their food.”

I had that thought, so I dragged my unwilling teacher along and went to a restaurant on the opposite side of the wall, but the food on the other side was delicious as well, and as expected, I wasn't able to rate either one over the other.

Feeling a sense of contentment from having full stomachs, the two of us once again returned to the other side of the wall.

“I ate too much... I can't walk anymore...”

Incidentally, I was the only one feeling contentment from having a full stomach. My teacher was nearly out on her feet.

“Sensei. The other side of the wall looked nearly identical to this side, how can that be?”

“.....”

My teacher rubbed her belly, let out a sigh, and replied.

“It just means that a lot of people who thought that the other side was wonderful felt the same way about this side as well.”

That means that even though the two sides are competing with each other, there is basically no difference between them at all.

Still, I suppose that's only natural. Even though they were divided into left and right



halves, the two were originally part of the same country, and only their desire to not lose to the other side caused them to end up in this state.

The two sides of this country are like mirror reflections of each other, and they serve to spur each other on to greater heights.

“.....Why is it that neither the right side nor the left side have realized that the other side is developing in a similar fashion to them?”

Hearing that question that I unintentionally spoke aloud, my teacher smiled gently.

And she gave me this answer.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because neither side has ever tried to see what is on the other side of the wall.”



“There is supposed to be a strange country with a large ash-grey wall that runs through its center.”

Trusting such rumors, a certain witch touched down in that country.

She was a traveling witch. She was wearing a black robe, a black tricorn, and a star-shaped brooch that was proof of her being a witch.

She looked to be in her late teens. Despite that, her face looked like that of a much younger girl.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

Standing in front of the soaring wall, the girl said that in a low voice. That wall was full of messages from all sorts of people who had visited the country.

By the way, speaking of that traveling witch.

Who is that girl who is living as a traveling witch just because it suits her tastes?

That’s right it’s me — too bad! It is I, Saya!

“Hey there, so you’re the Witch from the [Administrative Bureau of Magic]? What do you think of this wall?”

An official from that country came to stand beside me. I was dispatched to this country to fulfill a request from the officials of this country.

“It’s amazing. I can see that a lot of people have come to visit this country.”

I’m living as a traveler partly because it suits my interests, but my job involves traveling to places all over the world to resolve problems.

The Administrative Bureau of Magic basically works to resolve issues caused by magic, but we also take on other requests that can only be completed by using magic.

For example, the current job.

“Witch-dono. I assume you have already read this in the request form, but — can you please do something about this wall? About a decade ago, we started to have travelers carve their messages into the wall based on the suggestion of a traveling witch, but it looks like the novelty has worn off over time, and visitor traffic has fallen along with the number of people who are interested in writing a new message on the wall. The wall has been abandoned.”

Since it was a witch who started the practice, I suppose they want a witch to develop it further.

In other words, the present condition of this country was such that they arrived at the naive idea of borrowing the wisdom of a traveling witch, hoping that it would somehow fix their problems.

Was it really worth making making an official request to prevent this wall from being abandoned? If you ask me, this wall is pretty amazing even the way it is now.

“What do you say, Witch-dono? Do you have any good ideas?”

“Hmm...”

I stared at the wall for a while and thought about it.

It was a wall where a lot of travelers had left behind their marks. There were a great number of words and opinions engraved here — huh? What's with this message?

[This side of the wall is a very nice place.

—A traveling witch]

It looks a lot older than the other messages, and it is surrounded by a golden border and looks to be treasured more than all the other messages.

“Ah, that message was written by the witch who first made the suggestion of letting travelers write their messages on the wall. Due to her idea, our country was able to develop this far.”

Oh? That's pretty amazing. Looks like she was an incredible witch — eh?

## What's this?

“This handwriting, I’ve seen it somewhere before…”

[illegible]

“...Uehehe.”

“Witch-dono, are you okay? Your eyes are exuding madness.”

“Ah, I’m fine. I was just in a trance.”

“Ah... I-I see...”

I was drawn to this wall for some reason.

But I’m fine. In fact, I’m in top form.

Due to coming across traces of Elaina-san’s mother, my brain started working at a furious pace.

In other words, I instantly thought of a solution to the problem concerning this wall.

“Mister, can I borrow your knife?”

“I hardly feel comfortable with the idea of giving you a knife...”

“Come on, it’ll be fine.”

“Mu...”

The official handed over his knife, while looking obviously reluctant to do so.

I immediately used that knife to carve some words into the wall while saying to him,  
“You see? This is what you must do. This is the best solution.”

[I love Elaina-san Elaina-san Elaina-san Elaina-san Elaina-san Elaina]

If you’re curious why the last one has no honorific, it was because the official used all his strength to stop me.

“What do you think you’re doing, you fool! This wall is our important treasure with a long history! It is not some foolish thing you can play with by writing about your carnal desires!”

He was extremely angry.

I was just nonchalantly ignoring his words of anger.

“What are you talking about? This is something very important.”

“Important, my foot! This wall is meant for people to write about how wonderful this country is when they visit here!”

“Ah, about that rule. How about changing it from today?”

“.....What are you talking about?”

It looks like he didn’t understand what I was trying to say.

And so, I explained it to him in detail.

“Starting today, you should allow the citizens of this country to write whatever they want on the wall. Things like their passionate feelings about the person they love, or their dreams for the future. You should let them write about the things they love, as much as they want.”

“Why? What is the point of doing that?”

I thought I had explained it pretty clearly, but it looks like he still doesn’t understand. Or maybe it is just because his anger is almost beyond control.

He’s such a straight-laced person.

And so, I explained it even more clearly, in a soothing manner.

“After all, it is the people of this country who built this wall, correct? In that case, the wall should be used for the sake of the citizens.”

The wall does not belong to the travelers.

I told him that they should make it a wall that they could look at with pride.

A certain witch arrived at that country.

She had ashen hair and azure eyes. She was wearing a black robe and a tricorne, and that girl, who was wearing a star-shaped brooch proudly on her chest, was a traveler as well as a witch.

She appeared to be in her late teens.

Incidentally, she was the kind of lovely young woman that certain people might describe as a beautiful and lovely angel.

Just who is that girl?

That's right, it's me.

“.....”

One of the literary works that influenced me the most as a child was [The Adventures of Nike]. The witch who appears in those stories had carved a sentence into a wall, and among the fans of the series, it was said that there were many such countries around the world where such a wall was presumed to exist.

This was one of those countries.

As the author was said to have actually visited the country and carved a sentence into the wall, any true fan of the series would want to see that writing in person and pay homage. It was at the level of a customary pilgrimage where people would regularly come to this place.

I happened across this country while I was in the middle of my travels.

Despite that, I entered the country with a fairly high level of anticipation.

“.....It's been destroyed...”

The wall had been destroyed.

There was no massive wall in that country, it had become just a regular country.

What's going on? Don't tell me, did I make a mistake and come to the wrong place? I tilted my head in confusion, but there was no doubt about it, it was definitely the same place that the author had visited.

[This side of the wall is a very nice place.  
—A traveling witch]

[This side of the wall is a very nice place.  
—A traveling witch]

Two copies of the same sentence had been placed there, as a memorial. Those sentences were enclosed in golden borders and placed in the center of the country, where the wall once stood.

“Welcome! Would you like to buy a piece of the wall? It's cheap!”

“Would you be interested in buying a souvenir?”

“It's not ordinary wreckage, it's wreckage from that wall! It's rare, I tell you!”

The wall had been removed and the country had become just another ordinary country. And in the center of that country, the citizens were walking around selling pieces of the wall that had been broken down into hand-sized pieces that were small enough to carry.

It looked like they were unexpectedly popular, as there were a lot of travelers crowding around those salespeople.

Still, it's just rubble, right? Those stones only ever had value because they were part of the wall...

As I had no interest in rubble, I left that place quickly.

Right now, it was no longer the case where the country was divided into right and left sides, each with their own officials. Instead all the officials were now gathered in one place.

While I was walking along the street, I saw a building that was in the middle of being built.

[New town hall currently under construction]

I saw a sign which said that. Well, since that's what is written on the sign, it must be so.

"Hmm. I'm not sure how to feel about this building. The entrance is on the right side."

"What are you talking about? The windows are on the left. You have the better deal."

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?"

"....."

There were two old men who looked like officials, looking at the building under construction and having a quarrel about something unimportant.

While pushing down the anger that threatened to rise from the depths of my heart, I asked, "Are you officials from this country? Or are you just a pair of wrinkled old men?"

"We are indeed government officials."

"Although it is also true that we are wrinkled old men."

"That's fortuitous. Actually, there is something I would like to ask—"

And so, I told them what I had seen after coming to this country, and my reason for coming here.

"Fumu fumu. I see. That is certainly a valid question."

"In fact, there are still quite a few people who come here, saying that this place is a holy land from that book or something of that sort."

"Why did you destroy the wall?"



When I asked that, they told me the reason.

Here's what they said.

About ten years ago, due to a suggestion from a certain witch, travelers had begun to write their opinions about the country on the wall. However, quite recently, the citizens had also started to write about their feelings on the wall as well.

The names of the people they loved. Their hopes for the future. Their absurd wishes. Things that could definitely not be said aloud. Descriptions about the shape of the king's ears. And other wild delusions.

Alongside such things, the people of this country wrote about many other things as well, without holding back. They went to town on the wall, gradually scraping it away bit by bit.

A great many travelers had already carved many things into the wall, so in no time at all, the wall was filled and there was no space left to write anything.

It just goes to show that the people of the country had many things that they wanted to write on the wall.

However, now they had a problem

Before a few weeks had passed, the people of the country had become unable to bear looking at the words that they had written based on whatever happened to cross their minds at the time.

"Oh gods, what is this, it's so embarrassing."

"Who the heck wrote this nasty stuff about me!?"

"I broke up with that person the day after I drew a lovers' umbrella on this wall! I don't want to see it anymore!"

"Ugh... I wrote some pretty outrageous things here when I was drunk..."

You get the idea. The complaints from the citizens increased with each passing day.

Well, that was only natural. Unlike travelers, the citizens had to live in the same country where the wall stood. They had to keep living there, while looking at that wall everyday.

Well, it's said that "You should leave your shame behind when you go on a journey", after all.

However, if the citizens do that and start writing whatever they want, it will become preserved as an embarrassing memory that they can't get rid of.

In the end, with the number of complaints increasing every day, they finally decided to tear down the wall quite recently.

At some point, the people of the country realized that they had stopped resenting the people who lived on the opposite side.

It is likely that they saw themselves reflected in that massive wall.

Their preoccupation with thinking that they were better than the people who lived on the other side had been wiped away by the shameful things that they had written on the wall themselves.

We are not superior to them.

After all, see how foolish we are.

We should be apologizing to the people on the other side.

For the first time in their long history, the people of that country crossed over the wall and had a discussion with each other. Surprisingly enough, it looked like both the left and right side had been thinking the same thing, and so the process of destroying the wall after the discussions were complete went very smoothly.

"In the end, it turned out that there was no need for a wall in this country. From the start, we were all the same in every way."

"Well, we will probably live as an ordinary country from here on."

They finished their story by saying that.

Oh well.

In this manner, the citizens had destroyed the one reason why travelers would want to visit their country.

“Oh hello there, pretty Witch-san. How about buying a souvenir?”

“Let’s see... I suppose it might be okay to get one as a souvenir.”

“Thanks for buying!”

After returning to the center of the country, I purchased a piece of rubble (pocket edition) from the wall and started walking towards the gate of the country.

The piece of rubble that I purchased had the letters [Elai] carved into it.

.....Wait, it can’t be that someone decided to carve my name into the wall, right? Right??

“.....”

While feeling a sensation that couldn’t be put into words, I stuffed that piece of rubble into my bag.

In the end, I wasn’t able to see the thing that I was looking forward to see. This country is still barely able to function as a tourist spot by selling the rubble from the wall, but I’m sure that once they run out of rubble to sell, this country will become just another ordinary country.

It will turn into just another mediocre country, existing in one corner of the world where no one is under the impression that they are superior to someone else.

Oh well, maybe that is a good thing for this country after all.

A country does not exist for the sake of travelers or tourists. There is no need for a country to go to extraordinary lengths and adjust itself to travelers’ needs just to make them think that it is a wonderful place. Instead of working to ensure that tourists are

kept happy, it might make more sense to make the country a place that is convenient for its citizens to live in.

A country belongs to the people who live there, after all.

# Chapter 13

## The Slasher

By the time I had arrived in that country, in every alley and every shop, if more than two people happened to meet up, they would start exchanging rumors about the Slasher as a conversation opener.

“Hey, have you seen that Slasher?”

“I haven’t seen it, but I know for a fact that it has taken the lives of five women.”

“Yes, I saw him with my own eyes. It was on the night of the full moon. It was a man with a terrifying appearance—”

“No, the culprit is a woman. I saw her with my own eyes.”

“What did you say? I saw it as well, and the Slasher was a transsexual.”

“Oh my, I heard it was a puppet.”

“It’s terrible! This is so terrible! So basically someone in this city stole the lives of five women, is that right? I can’t so much as walk outside without being afraid! I’m going to shut myself away inside my house!”

Well, it was something like that.

The whole city was in an uproar, and all the residents who were walking in the alleys between red-bricked walls were trembling with fear. As I walked along the bright red road while listening closely to the conversations around me, I heard that a woman had been assaulted that morning as well, which was causing the people to be consumed by fear.

Despite that, the people who were not residents of the country looked fairly calm.

“Hey there. It looks like things are pretty bad.”

Who was that witch who said that in a carefree tone, walking around while nibbling on bread?

That's right, it was me.

I was not bothered about the incident at all.

It looked like the string of incidents perpetrated by that Slasher were a fairly big deal, as there was a witch from the Administrative Bureau of Magic walking around and carrying out her investigation.

The witch was an adult woman, with long, golden hair that glittered like stardust. She was wearing a white robe and tricorne, and had two brooches, one shaped like a star and the other shaped like the moon.

".....Dammit. Everyone I ask just spouts whatever nonsense they want."

By the way, it appears that the investigation is not going very well.

It looked like she was extremely irritated, as she was holding a smoking pipe in one hand while roughly blowing out white puffs of smoke from her mouth. The smoke that had a disagreeable smell was continuously leaking out from her mouth and the long-stemmed oriental pipe that she was holding.

However, I had no idea that this country was the kind of dangerous place where people get randomly assaulted on the streets. Maybe I should limit my stay here to just today, and leave as soon as possible. By the way, the smell is starting to get on my nerves so maybe I should just get away from this place right away as well.

".....Hmm? Hey, you over there. Do you have a moment?"

It was right after I started walking away hurriedly.

My shoulder was tapped on from behind, and the bad smell peculiar to smoking pipes wrapped itself around me. I really hate this kind of smell. I wrinkled my nose without realizing it.

Taking no pains to hide my disgust, I waved my hand to disperse the smoke and turned

around to find the witch from the Administrative Bureau of Magic looking at me.

“You there, are you a citizen of this country?”

“I am a traveler.”

“Hmm—By the way, do you know about the series of incidents that have occurred in this country recently?”

“That thing about a Slasher being on the loose? Well, I’ve at least heard about it. You’ve been going around asking everyone about it, after all. Unfortunately, I don’t know anything else about it.”

Hearing my reply, she put on an expression that told me she was not amused.

“.....That’s unfortunate. Well, if you come across any information, please pass it on to me. I’m going to the place where the people of this country gather together to see if I can find any information on this Slasher. Well then, I’ll see you around.”

“I doubt I’ll come across anything like that, but sure.”

“.....Why are you pinching your nose?”

“Please don’t mind me.”

I replied in a nasal voice.

The witch slightly tilted her head to the side in confusion and pulled out a piece of paper from her shirt pocket.

“My name is Sheila. I am a witch from the [Administrative Bureau of Magic].”

The same words she just said to me were written on that piece of paper that thrust towards me. Along with the title [Witch of Midnight].





“My name is Elaina. The Witch of Ashes, Elaina—but don’t think we will ever meet again.”

Even so, I accepted the scrap of paper from her.

○

I felt that it would be a suicidal act to roam around carelessly in a city that was thick with rumors about a Slasher, so I went straight to an inn and booked a room for myself.

As all the buildings and houses in this country are uniformly built with red colored bricks, it took me a lot of effort to find an inn. Besides, I felt that I was gathering a lot of attention—the bad kind—by walking around dressed in a witch’s attire.

It’s probably because of the [Witch of Midnight], Sheila-san, has been snooping around the city and bothering people while looking for clues about the incident—because of that, I was getting a lot of dirty looks, just because I was a witch.

“.....”

It started to get annoying, so I decided to take off my brooch and walk around as just an ordinary magician.

Still, no matter how far I walked, the surroundings all looked identical. In one way that was a lovely sight, but when walking around in search of something it was just extremely tiring.

As I kept walking through the city, I found a bunch of different shops, such as a bookstore, a cafe, stores selling dolls, and many others besides. It looked like dolls were the speciality of this country, so I saw many stores that sold them.

Seeing as this country specializes in dollmaking, I thought of buying one as a souvenir and walked into one of the stores.

“Fufufu... welcome. The dolls in my store are something else, they are all amazing. They are rare items that I ordered from a different country a very long time ago. They are vintage. Take a look at this one, she is a particularly splendid piece... See how the quality of the hair is so good that it feels almost real? Isn’t it just the best? She smells so good too. Do you want to take a sniff? ”

“Ah. Sorry, I seem to have come to the wrong shop by mistake.”

I immediately beat a retreat. As that place had a really questionable atmosphere surrounding it.

In the end, I just trudged through the city until I finally found an inn.

I walked into that red brick building that looked identical to all the others, paid for a room for one night, and shut myself away inside.

Even I am slightly fearful of that so-called Slasher, so I made sure to lock my door and close the window.

“.....There’s one in here as well.”

As expected of the country’s speciality, there was a doll sitting on my bedside table.

It was a doll modeled to look like a young girl with golden hair and wearing a gaudy dress. The corners of its mouth were slightly raised in a smile, but its eyes were just staring in the direction of the dilapidated old room. It’s kind of creepy.

“.....”

I couldn’t relax with that doll looking at me, so I lifted it up and tossed it into the closet.

“Oh well, I should probably go to bed early today.”

After that, I took a bath, munched on some bread for dinner, laid face up on the bed, and read a book until night had completely fallen.

“.....”

Isn’t it strange how you feel sleepy when you have nothing to do?

At some point, I had fallen into a deep sleep.

It was the next morning.

“.....It looks like I dozed off.”

After putting the book that was lying on top of me on the bedside table, I got out of bed.

I could see that the sky outside the window looked bright and clear, and the red colored buildings were illuminated by the sunlight. A warm breeze blew in through the window, causing the curtains to shake as it coiled around me.

I closed my eyes while enjoying the pleasant feeling of the breeze for some time—

“.....Hmm?”

What’s this?

I don’t remember opening the window.

Hmmmmmmm?

I guess I must have opened it at some point?

Unfortunately my memories from last night before I fell asleep are somewhat vague, and I don’t remember when I fell asleep. I can’t even remember how far I had gotten in reading the book.

Did I open the window at some point, and forget about it?

That would be quite careless.

“Oh well, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Seeing as I’m still alive, I didn’t become the next victim of the Slasher, at the very least.

The fact is, even though I’m a witch, I don’t stand a chance if I’m attacked in my sleep. I was a little relieved by the fact that nothing had happened even though my window was open.

However.

“.....I feel somewhat strange.”

I felt like my body was strangely light, or as if something was missing. There was a slight feeling of having lost something, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

.....

“Oh well, I guess it doesn't matter.”

In the end, still half asleep, I ignored that feeling of uneasiness and headed towards the bathroom after taking my toothbrush out of my bag.

Now, what should I do today—I was thinking something like that.

However.

When I turned my eyes towards my reflection in the mirror, I instantly came fully awake.

An unbelievable sight was reflected in the mirror.

I found out what was causing the uneasy feeling.

“Eh—what's going on?”

I dropped my toothbrush into the washbasin and touched my hair with trembling fingers.

My glossy, ash-grey, waist-length hair had been cleanly cut off.

There was no sight of it anywhere.

My long hair was gone.

During the time when I was asleep, my hairstyle had abruptly changed from long hair to short.

“.....I don't even recognize myself.”

At this point, I suddenly remembered.

The rumors that were exchanged in the city yesterday,

The Slasher.

The one who stole the lives of five women.

A woman's life.

“.....”

By the way, I've heard about hair being called a woman's life before.

○

“It's just as you suspected, this is certainly the work of that Slasher. One girl was suddenly attacked on her way home from shopping. Another was attacked when taking her ease at a cafe—And in your case, it looks like the culprit got to you while you were asleep.”

This is what happened after I realized that my hair had been chopped off.

The first thing I did was to walk unsteadily to the front desk of the inn while still in my pyjamas, explain the situation to the old woman there, give her the visiting card that I had got from [The Witch of Midnight] Sheila-san, and ask the old woman to bring her here. The loss of my precious long hair was such a big shock that I didn't feel up to going outside. By the way, I threw a gold coin at the old lady because she appeared to be hesitating.

After that, I returned to my room, lay on my bed face down, and sulked until Sheila-san arrived.

And then, when Sheila-san saw me after she hurried over, she let out a snort of laughter.

“I can't believe that even a witch has become one of the victims of the Slasher... Ahem.”

“.....”

I didn't have the energy to say anything back to her, so I settled for glaring at her from atop my bed.

She slumped her shoulders as if to show that she wasn't bothered in the least by my glare, and spoke while putting on a pair of gloves.

"Well, I'll be taking a look at the scene of the crime."

"What should I do?"

"Just keep sitting there and don't move."

"....."

It looks like I just need to wait without doing anything, so I'll do just that.

While sitting on the bed, I observed Sheila-san as she went about her work.

With an experienced air, she went about the room and turned the furniture upside down. She turned over everything, from the shelves to the table, the closet, and even the flower vase. Of course the bed was not an exception either, and I, who was following instructions and not moving a muscle, was dropped off the side when the bed flipped over.

"Hmm... There's nothing that looks suspicious."

"I think the most suspicious thing in this room is you, Sheila-san."

I spoke from my place on the floor where I had fallen.

"I'm not being suspicious. This is part of my investigation, I tell you."

Sheila-san was looking down towards me.

"By the way, did you see anything suspicious? Is there anything about the room that looks different compared to yesterday?"

"Every single thing looks different."

Everything is upside down, after all.

“Enough with the jokes.”

“Well, even if you say that.....”

However, it was true that I had a good view of the room from my place where I lay sprawled on the floor, so there was one thing I noticed all of a sudden.

“.....Ah. The doll is missing.”

“A doll?”

I nodded and pointed a finger at the closet.

“I took the doll that was sitting on the bedside table and put it inside the closet yesterday, and now it’s missing.”

“Fumu fumu... I see.”

Sheila-san nodded as though she was convinced of something, and muttered “I knew it!” under her breath.

“What is it?”

“This string of incidents all have one common feature. Every one of the girls just got their hair cut and were not otherwise harmed in any way—so I spent the whole day yesterday walking around and talking to the victims, and every single one of them insists that they were attacked by the same thing.”

“And what is that?”

Hearing my question, Sheila-san gave me a concise answer.

“Dolls.”

“.....”

“It is likely that the culprit is using magic to control the dolls and make them cut off womens’ hair. With that in mind, I went walking around the city trying to find the real culprit... well, I’ve not made any progress with that.”

After all, depending on who you ask, the culprit is a terrifying man, or a woman, or a transsexual.

Picking out the truth from a sea of rumors is obviously going to be difficult.

“In that case, what was it that you realized just earlier?”

“I went around talking to the victims—as I mentioned just earlier—and thanks to that, I managed to find out where the dolls are coming from.”

“Hou.”

I see, I see.

“In that case, let’s go and crush the source where these things are coming from. I will send them to the depths of hell, where they can atone for the crime of cutting off my hair.”

I stood up from the floor.

I’m feeling very motivated all of a sudden. I am overflowing with motivation and a desire to kill.

“Hey, calm down a bit. I’m not done talking yet.”

“What is it? Did you already snap the culprit’s neck?”

“I can’t follow that leap in logic.....”

Sheila-san let out a big sigh.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I’ve figured out where the dolls are coming from, but that place is a little troublesome.”

“What do you mean by troublesome?”



Sheila-san spoke after glancing at my chest as I changed out of my pyjamas.

“Apparently, rare dolls are sold in black market auctions in this country. None of the dolls being sold are regular products, they all come with shady histories attached. Due to that, both the sellers and the buyers use fake names while carrying out their business.”

Why is she saying that while staring at my chest?

“.....”

However, I got the gist of what she was trying to say. I quickly put on my shirt and skirt to escape from Sheila-san’s gaze, and said,

“So the dolls that were purchased by the victims also came from there?”

Sheila-san nodded. She was still staring at my chest.

“By the way, it looks like the that old lady who owns this inn is quite an avid collector herself. I threatened her earlier and made her spill the beans, but it looks like she buys her dolls from the same source as the other victims.”

After saying that, Sheila-san started rummaging around in her bag.

And then she said, “Ah, here it is” as she pulled a doll out of her bag.

It’s a golden haired doll that looks a lot like the one that was sitting on my bedside table last night.

“This is something I pillaged from the old lady here after threatening her some more. It looks like this one and the dolls that belonged to the other victims were made by the same dollmaker.”

“It looks just like an ordinary doll. Although it has a creepy air around it that makes you think it might start moving about any second.”

Sheila-san put on a boastful expression as she held the doll by the scruff of its neck and shook it.

“Does it really look ordinary to you? Take a closer look. The person who made this must have quite a twisted nature.”

“.....Hmm?”

I moved my face close to take a better look at the doll. As it shook, the doll with a creepy smile seemed to look back at me.

After the doll and I stared at each other for a while,

“Ah.”

I realized what she was getting at.

“Is it the hair?”

Sheila-san nodded in affirmation.

“That’s right. This thing’s hair is real, it came from a person. That’s what makes it look so realistic.”

“.....”

“What’s more, it is was probably made from the hair of one of the Slasher’s victims.”

“I see.”

Indeed, that person sounds really twisted.

“Well, that’s how it is. That’s why they are being sold in the black market auctions.”

Sheila-san spoke while continuing to shake the doll.

“Speaking of the black market auctions, it looks like there’s one being held today as well.”

“Hou.”

“Do you want to go?”

Instead of answering her, I silently put on my robe and tricorne, and gathered my luggage.

Pushing my hair out in one smooth motion after putting on my robe was something I was used to doing, but my hair that was cut sorrowfully short was already outside my clothes.

.....

That doll maker shall not be forgiven.

“Well then, let’s go.”

I left the room along with Sheila-san who nodded at my words.

“By the way, why did you keep staring at my chest earlier?”

“Hmm? Well... I was just thinking about how pitifully small they were.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Also, if you’re going to the place where the black market auction is being held, take off your robe and tricorne. Wearing such noticeable clothes increases the risk of someone finding out who you really are.”

“.....”

[The Witch of Midnight] shall not be forgiven.

○

Apparently, the entrance to the black market auction was behind a shop that would take a bit of a walk to reach after going through several back alleyways in the city. The whole thing reeks of sneakiness.

There are three requirements we would have to fulfil before entering the black market

auction venue.

The first was that we could not reveal our identities to anyone.

In other words, while we are inside the premises, we are just customers; nothing more and nothing less. We have to play that part to perfection, even though it is beneath us.

Due to that, I was dressed very plainly in just a shirt and skirt, and Sheila-san was wearing a dress for some reason. I thought we weren't supposed to dress gaudily as it would draw attention?

The second requirement was that we had to wear masks.

It looks like we will need to wear these masks that just cover the area around the eyes to hide our identities. We are being sneaky, after all.

".....These masks just cover the eyes, so won't we be found out right away?"

"Don't say it. It's more about creating the right atmosphere. Don't you feel like you're doing something wrong when you wear a mask?"

"Well, just the fact that we are at a black market auction already makes it plenty wrong."

What the heck is this person talking about?

"Oh well, let's get inside, for starters."

Wearing costumes and masks to disguise our true identities, we stepped into the premises where the black market auction would take place.

Incidentally, the third requirement was that we needed to pay an entrance fee.

Although the black market auction was being held in a basement, it was a really beautiful place, and it could even be called dazzling.

A dazzling chandelier was giving off a golden light while hanging from the ceiling that had a mysterious painting on it. Below that were rows of seats that appeared to be lined with red cloth, and overall, it looked more like an opera house than a black

market auction house.

“I heard that this place used to be an opera house in the past.”

“Hou.”

Correction. It didn't just look like one, it actually was an opera house.

Well, perhaps in the past this place used to be filled with people who were dressed appropriately and indulged in their noble pastime, but...

“Hehehe... I'm going to get that doll for sure today... Hehehe...”

“I'm definitely going to get it, I'm definitely going to get it, I'm definitely going to get it!”

“I've been saving my money all this time for this day. I'm not going home until I get what I came for.”

“.....”

What can I say, wherever I look, I see only people with bloodshot eyes who don't suit this place at all.

While keeping an eye on the strange behaviour of the people around us, the two of us took our seats. Sheila-san, who was sitting beside me, spoke while fiddling with the bidding paddle that she had received.

“Every single person here looks desperate.”

She sighed after saying that.

“They're just dolls, I wonder why they are all so worked up.”

“I don't really get it, but maybe they are just drawn to the allure of owning items that cannot be purchased legally.”

“Haa.”

I don't really understand this kind of passion.

We waited for several minutes inside that noisy venue, until a man finally appeared on the stage.

"Thanks for waiting, everyone! We have some wonderful products today as well, made by our artisans just for you! Everyone, do you want one of these for yourself? You do, don't you? Of course you do!"

Despite that poor attempt to stir up the crowd, the whole venue went crazy. It was like a pot on the verge of boiling over.

I mean, if they didn't want one, they wouldn't have bothered coming all the way here, now would they? That's pretty obvious, right?

After that, the man on the stage spent some time going over the important points of how an auction is conducted, and a simple explanation of the rules.

If you are interested in an item, raise your bidding paddles and state your price, and the person with highest offer will win the bid. If the price goes beyond what you can afford, give up. Under no circumstances should you do something like digging your own grave by going over your budget, so be careful.

Well, it was a bunch of stuff like that.

Although this stuff is pretty obvious as well.

"Well then, let's begin! The first product is this one!"

And then, after waiting until the time was ripe, the doll was presented on stage.

It was a female doll. Life-sized.

"Ah, so that's what they meant by illegal products."

"I see."

It looked to be very popular, as a number of paddles went up and a fierce bidding competition began among the people in the venue. After a close contest, a rich-looking

old man won the bid for a high price.

“I wonder if all the dolls are of that type?”

“No, I don’t think that is the case. If my information is not wrong, then the dolls that caused this series of incidents were also purchased here.”

However, from what I saw on the stage, the second doll was also a life-sized female doll, as was the third one.

What the heck is up with this auction?

“.....”

I started to show an interest in the dolls that were being presented on stage after the voices of the people around me gradually started to get more and more annoying.

“Alright everyone, here’s what you’ve been waiting for! Here it is! Our featured product this time around!”

It was a normal sized doll, about the same size as the doll that had been placed in my inn room.

Looking closer, I saw that it was wearing the same kind of gaudy dress that the doll in my room had been wearing, and was overall quite similar in appearance.

Well, to put it simply...

“Isn’t that the one?”

That’s how it was.

“That’s right.”

Since she was correct, I nodded.

“.....Actually, what’s with that doll? Are they trying to pick a fight with me?”

“Calm down, calm down.”

“.....”

As expected, the doll was another one of those twisted creations.

“Please take a look at this one! In order to make it realistic, this doll uses actual human hair!”

The man on the stage seemed somehow excited as he shouted that.

“And what’s more, it’s ash-grey in color! Not only is it a rare color, the hair is glossy and extremely beautiful!”

Well then, just who is the owner of that beautiful hair?

That’s right, it’s me..... probably. No, I’m almost certain that it is mine.

The audience went crazy over how beautiful it was. People started shouting in a frenzy from all sides, and it got so bad that I could no longer tell if they were shouting in appreciation or just screaming.

What the heck is going on? That’s my hair, you know?

“They’re messing with me. This calls for a slaughter.”

“Well, calm down a bit. Those customers don’t know how the hair was acquired. They are not to blame.”

Selena-san made a show of soothing my tempter.

However.

“What’s more, this entry was submitted to the auction by the Slasher who has spread fear among the public! What do you say? Isn’t it amazing!?”

The people at the venue got even more excited on hearing the man’s words.

“Dammit, they make it so hard to take their side.”



Sheila-san slumped her shoulders. Perhaps she got tired of trying to be rational.

“By the way, Sheila-san. We’ve discovered that that doll has been put up for sale by the Slasher, so now what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We win the bid, and then discover the identity of the seller.”

“Hou.”

As I was nodding to her idea, the auction had begun. The man on the stage banged his wooden mallet on the table.

“Well then, the starting price is one gold coin!”

With that sound as the start signal, bidding paddles started going up all over the venue and the shouts of people came from all directions.

Two gold, three gold, five, seven, nine, ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen—

The price for the doll which had hair that was stolen from me continued to rise at an insane rate. The inflation in price was unreal. It was skyrocketing.

“It looks like winning the bid is going to be difficult.”

“.....I guess so.”

As the price for the doll crossed the twenties and started to approach thirty, my stress increased proportionally and I was about to reach my limit.

All of a sudden, something within me snapped. Probably because of my hair that had been cut off.

I stood up from my seat.

“Sheila-san. We don’t need to win the bid, there is a much more convenient method available.”

“Twenty nine gold! Any other bids? No one else? In that case, sold for twenty nine—”

Oh no you don’t.

I won’t let you do something like that.

Just as the man shouted the final price in a loud voice and was about to swing his hammer down,

“Ei.”

A beam of light extended from my staff and blew the hammer away. After spinning a few times, the hammer that was blasted out of the man’s hand fell onto the stage.

“Huh? What the heck—Owaaaaaaaaaah!”

While I was at it, I sent the man flying as well. He was in the way.

As the venue became noisy because of unexpected incident, my footsteps echoed coldly. I could feel the stares directed at me increasing as I approached the stage.

What’s going on? Hey, look at that hair. It’s same color as the doll’s. Don’t tell me that’s from her? Hey, isn’t this starting to look pretty bad?

The people were saying things like that.

“Do any of you know the identity of the person who submitted that doll to the auction? Are you aware of where the hair used to make that doll came from?”

As I walked towards the stage, I raised my voice and spoke to the entire venue.

“No, I’m certain that you knew it. You knew that the Slasher is the person who created that doll, and that the hair was from one of his victims.”

That hair, which happened to be mine.

“Now, listen closely. Maybe you lot think that you’re innocent because you’re just

purchasing the items, but the instant you purchased these dolls you are guilty of the same crime. No, the instant you set foot into this venue, you became guilty of the same crime. This is a crime that deserves death.”

With a loud footstep, I stepped on to the stage.

“The culprit is probably here, in the crowd. They are the kind conceitful person who takes great pains to make beautiful dolls and then go to the effort of putting them up for auction, after all. So I’m certain that they are here, waiting to see what kind of price their doll will fetch.”

After saying that, I lifted that doll up by its neck.

“However there are a considerable number of people in this place. There are likely a few hundred people here. Finding the culprit among all the people here would be a daunting task—and that being the case, I gave the matter some thought.”

I thought about how to catch the criminal.

However, despite that, I could not find any answer. More accurately, it is impossible to do. And to be frank, I stopped thinking about it halfway through.

“I’m sure there is only one culprit, but all of you here are accomplices, right? A person who steals hair from other people, uses that to make dolls, and then sells them without so much as batting an eyelash is of course a sinner, but you people who want to buy them even knowing about that are also equally sinful.”

And so.

“That makes me very angry, and I want to do something to get rid of this anger, so I have decided to send everyone here to the afterlife. As for how, well, it will probably be something like this.”

The doll’s neck broke with a loud sound.

“As for the rest—it will be something like this.”

Once more.

The doll's hair cleanly came out of its head.

"And then—maybe something like this as well."

The doll's four limbs were separated from its body and the pieces fell to the floor.

"Right then, who wants to get erased from existence first? Are there any volunteers? Ufufu."

Hearing my voice echo throughout the venue, I realized that the venue was bigger than I had imagined. I also realized that the other people present had all gone silent.

I waited a little while, and then I waited some more, but nobody said anything.

Do they think they can get away by remaining silent? They are taking me lightly indeed.

"Ei."

I stepped on the broken doll, and then continued to slowly grind my heel into it.

"I see the culprit is staying silent. Well then, let's start one person at a time from the right side, you will end up with the same fate as this doll. "

Right after I said that,

"How could you do something so horrible?"

I heard a voice, coming from somewhere in the venue.

It was the voice of a woman.

"That doll belongs to me, you know? Do you understand what that means? It's vintage. It's not something that you should be handling so roughly."

It sounded like that woman was quite angry. With long strides, she walked from the customer seats and up to the stage.

"Hmm? Have we met somewhere before?"

Her face looked familiar.

“Ever since you came to my shop yesterday, I’ve been thinking only about that hair of yours.”

“.....”

Now I remember.

This person is the owner of that doll shop. She’s the owner of that doll shop that gave me nothing but bad vibes.

“Your hair is very beautiful and rare. I’ve never seen such wonderful hair, so I couldn’t resist taking a little for myself. Are you angry?”

“.....”

I continued to grind my heel into the doll, to show her how I felt.

“Oh my! You look wonderful even when you’re angry!”

The lady was wriggling her body around like a young maiden in love.

“Why do you insist on putting real hair on dolls?”

“Isn’t that obvious? It’s because I want to make these beautiful and wonderful creations even more popular! When you put real hair on a doll, they become so much more lifelike. That’s why, in the beginning, I cut my own hair and put it on dolls. But after a while, I started to want something more, and I started using hair from other people. I manipulate the dolls from a distance and have them cut hair from girls. The expressions of despair and anger that girls make when they lose their long hair are really wonderful! At some point, the very act of cutting the hair became so much fun that I couldn’t stop! Ah, such a wonderful feeling!”

“Uhh, okay.”

I felt disgusted.

I drew away from her in disgust.

My poor hair is so unfortunate, being cut off for such selfish reasons.

“Right then, Magician-san. Are you going to give into your anger and attack me? Just so you know, I’m a witch. Do you know what that means? We witches stand at the top among all magicians. You have no chance of defeating me. Are you going to give in to your anger and attack me, in spite of that?”

“.....”

Umm, I’m a witch too.

Since I had taken off my brooch before entering her shop, she probably misunderstood that I am just an ordinary magician.

“Come on. Hey, come on. What are you going to do? Show me how your face looks when you are overtaken with rage!”

The woman just continued to get worked up by herself.

I just gave her a pitying look and said one thing to her.

“—Unfortunately, this is the end of the line for you.”

Immediately after I said that,

A cage just large enough to hold one person dropped down from above and trapped the woman. Her hands were bound with special handcuffs that had chains to restrain the fingers, to make it impossible for her to grip her staff.

The whole process took only a second.

In just one second, the woman who was ranting by herself on the stage turned into some kind of freakish exhibit.

“Hey there. Thanks for the help, Elaina.”

Sheila-san’s voice echoed from some place within the venue. By the way I saw a coil of

smoke rise up as well, but after an announcement over the PA that smoking was not allowed inside, the smoke disappeared.

The cage was created by Sheila-san's magic, to capture the criminal.

".....Huh?"

Taken by surprise, the woman banged on the bars of the cage with her hands that were forced open by the handcuffs.

"What are you doing? What do you think you're doing? You're angry, right? Are you satisfied with such a dull ending? You should be more angry!"

"....."

I couldn't tell what made her so angry.

I couldn't understand why she would use human hair to make dolls, but her desire to see the despaired and angry expression of girls was even harder to understand.

Even so, it gives me a bad feeling.

People like her really don't understand anything.

I put the biggest smile I could on my face, and told her one thing.

"Obviously, I'm putting forward my best effort to do the thing you hate the most, precisely because I'm extremely angry with you."

○

Let me give you a brief account of what happened after that.

The incident was safely resolved.

And so, having safely recovered my lost hair, I immediately used magic to repair it and turned my hair back into its usual silky and glossy long hairstyle. Welcome back, my hair.

Also, we managed to capture the criminal. Oh wait, I guess you already know that.

Her modus operandi, in brief, was to use magic to control dolls from a distance. If she wanted to, she could have probably operated that doll that was on the stage as well, but since I smashed it to bits without wasting any time, she had no choice but to put in an appearance herself.

After being captured, she was taken out of the country by Sheila-san—to a nearby branch of the Administrative Bureau of Magic.

Once there, she will be dealt with appropriately.

“I recommend that she be given a death sentence.”

Sheila-san, who was escorting the criminal, furrowed her eyebrows when she heard me say that.

“Unfortunately, the only thing she did was to cut people’s hair, so I don’t think she will face very heavy charges. At the very least, there is no chance of her being given a death sentence.”

“That is not acceptable. Please execute her.”

“Don’t ask for the impossible, you idiot.”

“She should pay for her sins against my hair. So an execution is appropriate.”

“But your hair is back to normal, isn’t it?”

“Then I’ll cut it off again right now.”

“What is driving you to go so far...?”

Well, if I had to put it shortly, it’s the anger I feel for the criminal?

Even while Sheila-san and I were talking, that criminal was saying things like “Fufufu” and “How nice...” while drooling. She’s not repenting for her actions one bit.

I’d love to give her a good beating with all my strength, but I get the feeling that it will



just make her even happier. So troublesome.

Hmm...

“You look like you’re thinking pretty hard about something.”

Sheila-san slumped her shoulders as she said that.

“Well, don’t worry about it. Once we reach our destination, she probably has a more harsh punishment than execution waiting for her.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know. What do you think?”

After trying to pass it off with a vague smile, Sheila-san levitated the cage with magic and got on her broom.

“Well then, I should get going. I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“I see.”

“Let’s meet again, Witch of Ashes-san.”

She is a witch of the Administrative Bureau of Magic. And I am a traveling witch.

I doubt that we will ever meet again, but sure, why not.

“See you around, Witch of Midnight-san.”

Once again, I put a wide smile on my face.



And now, for some further facts about what happened later.

The [Witch of Midnight], Sheila, hung the large cage from the handle of her broom and flew away over the grasslands to the nearest country that had an Administrative Bureau of magic branch.

There are branches of the Administrative Bureau of Magic all over the world, so the Slasher was on her way to a branch the very day after the incident was settled.

Once Sheila reaches a branch office, submits a report, and hands over the criminal, she will receive a fairly sizeable sum of money from the branch office.

This is how those magicians who wander from place to place while resolving problems live their lives.

“Ah! I was wondering who it was, so it’s you, Master!”

By the way, there are many such magicians who wander from place to place while resolving problems.

Sheila’s student was also one of them.

“Oh, so you were here?”

“I just got here. I’m a little short of money, so I wanted to check if there were any jobs available.”

With her black hair waving slightly, Sheila’s student looked at the cage that stood beside her.

“.....If you’d like, I could take that job off your hands.”

“What are you, an idiot? The job is pretty much already done.”

“Which is why I wanted to take it off your hands.”

“.....”

Sheila let out a sigh.

“What did this person do? Her eyes are sparkling strangely.”

The woman in the cage looked exhilarated at the sight of the new person.

“Ahh... So cute! I’m sure she’d be even cuter when she’s angry!”

She was saying things like that, but luckily those words didn’t reach the student’s ears.

“This one? Umm, well you see...”

Sheila thought for a bit about whether it was okay to tell her the details and then,

“This woman here is the Slasher who went around cutting off people’s hair.”

“Hou.”

“Not only did she go about it in a pretty horrible way, She was even vicious enough to cut a traveling witch’s hair, so I captured her and was about to deliver her to the branch office here.”

“Oh? She cut a traveling witch’s hair?”

“That’s right—”

Sheila suddenly gave a bright smile.

“It was a witch with beautiful ash-grey hair.”

“A traveling witch with beautiful, ash-grey hair? Hmm.....”

“Also, she was wearing a tricorne identical to yours.”

“A tricorne identical to mine? HmMMM...”

“Oh, and she was also wearing a necklace identical to yours.”

“Oh, really? I see.”

Sheila felt that with every sentence she said, her student’s smile started to get more and more eerie.

She also heard the cage next to her leaking words such as “I don’t know what’s going on, but I can see that she is angry!” in a tone filled with anticipation.

The student spoke with a smile still fixed on her face.

“Could you tell me more about that, in detail?”

By the way, the student’s name was Saya.

Afterwards, the Slasher found out.

She found out just how lukewarm the despair and anger of girls who had their hair cut off was in comparison.

# Chapter 14

## The Tale of the Witch of Ashes, Filled With All Manner of Commonplace Things

Let me tell you a tale about myself.

Well, I suppose all the tales I've told so far are about myself, but even so, I will call this a tale about myself.

I wear a black robe and a tricorne. I am a witch, as well as a traveler.

I am always traveling all over the world, wandering around aimlessly as I meet strange people, visit strange countries, or get caught up in strange events.

However, it is not as if I always encounter precious experiences like that.

If the stories of my travels were to be published as a book, it might appear that I am always caught up in strange events, but that is not actually the case. Of all the countries I have visited, the places where I was able to complete my sightseeing and leave without any incidents are overwhelmingly greater in number.

It is really only very rarely that I get caught up in strange events. Even if I want to encounter some strange or exciting events, most of the time it doesn't end up that way, and when I feel that it would be a pain in the neck, the strange events come after me relentlessly.

To travel means to be faced with continuous meetings and partings, and at the same time, it is a continuous series of choices as well. Looking back on my choices, there have been times when I missed meeting some strange and interesting people, and times when I got to know some strange and weird people as well.

However, there is no point in feeling regret. As long as you travel, you have no choice but to push forward.

And so, I am continuing my travel today as well.

I had a premonition that I would have another one of those strange meetings a little while later, after flying on my broom for some distance.

“[The Country That Will Grant Your Wish], is it? Hmm...”

It was a place in the middle of wide plains.

I found a country with those words written on the gate.

Oh my, now this is certainly something.

The wording of that interests me greatly.

How does it work? If I wish to become wealthy, will I actually become wealthy?

Also written on the gate was the sentence [If you're curious, please come inside]. It looks like they are welcoming everyone with open arms, no matter who they are.

Still, just how are they granting the wishes of people? What exactly is this country?

The gate that was built into the walls of the country was not very big, but I still couldn't see what was inside from here. I couldn't tell what kind of country it was either.

At this point, I have many questions, but no answers.

However I could tell that this promised to be fairly interesting, and so,

“Excuse me~”

That's exactly why I opened the gate of that country.

○

There was certainly a country on the other side of the gate; however, for some reason, there was not a single person to be found.

It was as silent as the grave, with just rows of houses standing next to each other. Not

only could I not hear any people, there was no sign of any people there at all. The only sound I heard was the echoing of my own footsteps.

The city didn't seem to be abandoned. The houses that lined both sides of the street were quite mismatched as they were either faced with brickwork, or had white plaster walls, or were finished in a riot of colors. It was a chaotic city that looked like sights from all sorts of different cities had been stuffed into one place.

Despite the fact that there is no sign of people anywhere, there are clothes lines with laundry hanging to dry strung up between the buildings, and I can see what look like street stalls on the sides of the street. The stands have things like fruit and other food on them as well, but it looks like they are all self-service. Signboards that said [Please leave the appropriate amount of money for your purchase] stood leaning against the stalls.

However, I still haven't seen a single person. No matter if I look to the left or the right, I don't see people anywhere.

All I can see are signs that people were living here.

Wait a minute, weren't they going to grant my wish? What's going on?

I tilted my head to one side in confusion at this mysterious reality.

At any rate, there is no doubt that I have come to a strange place.

".....Hmm."

After walking for a while along the street, I saw a royal palace.

It was a weathered old palace, and doesn't match the rest of the city which has traces of human habitation. There are so many cracks running through the walls that it looks like it will collapse if I hit it.

There was a clocktower standing near to the palace, and it was relentlessly marking the passage of seconds. According to the clock, it was currently a little past noon.

"....."

Hang on.

Why am I feeling such a sense of déjà vu?

Everything I've seen so far looks vaguely familiar. The surroundings look like an aggregation of the various sights I've seen during my travels so far. And the royal palace looks identical to the one in the ruined country where only the princess had been left behind. As for the clock tower, it looks a lot like the one I saw just recently in the Clocktower Country, Rostalf.

Just what is going on here?

It looks like the whole city was designed just for me—however, that wasn't the only strange thing. Despite the fact that there were many buildings that were clearly taller than the gate, why didn't I notice any of them until after I entered the country?

At this point I started to feel like this country is made up of nothing but strange things.

While tilting my head in confusion, I was groaning from the sense of bafflement and took a right turn on the street, when,

"Huh? Are you perhaps one of the residents of this country?"

I ran into that person all of a sudden. It looked like she was a traveler like me who happened to come across this place, and as soon as he saw me she came over while speaking in a carefree tone and waving her hand.

"Hmm. Looks like I was wrong. You're not a resident of this country, right? For some reason, your face gives me that impression."

"....."

By the way, the girl who appeared before me was quite strange, just like the rest of the country.

She was wearing a black robe, a tricorne, and a star-shaped brooch. She appears to be a witch. She has ash-grey hair and azure eyes. She looks about as old as me—

Just who was that witch?



That's right, it was me.

She appeared to be me but was not me—a girl whose appearance was exactly the same as mine is standing before me.

She was like my doppelganger.

“Hey there. Are you like one of my fans or something? Oh look, you're cosplaying as me! Cosplaying without permission is a bit annoying, though. I should charge you for copying my dressing style, you know?”

“.....”

By the way, it looked like the similarity was restricted only to the appearance. A severe lack of intelligence could be felt from the way she behaved.

○

“My name is Elaina. The Witch of Ashes, Elaina. I am a traveler.”

“My name is Elaina too. I am the Witch of Ashes and a traveler. Ah, cosplaying as me without permission goes against that copyright thingy and the fine is one million gold coins, so take care of that, would you?”

I ignored the second half of that as it was just silly talk.

“Actually, I wonder why there are two of me here...”

“Eh? I'm me, and you're a cosplayer, right? What the heck are you talking about?”

“.....”

Right back at you, what are you talking about? Are you an idiot? Is your skull filled with nothing but air?

“I'm sorry, but could you list out the countries that you have visited so far?”

I decided to focus on finding out if the version of me in front of me is an impostor or

not. To make sure I don't forget about the countries I've visited, I keep a hidden diary in the pocket of my robe.

I've never told anyone about it, and I definitely don't take it out when other people are around. If she really is me, I thought that she should be able to use that to list out the countries she has visited so far.

However.

"Why are you asking me about that? Wait, let me guess, you want to turn all those places I've visited into holy sites and go on a pilgrimage, is that right? You're such a nerd."

".....What's with this person, she's so annoying to deal with."

Nothing she says makes any sense. I was sorely tempted to conclude that this kind of person was definitely not me.

And then, unfortunately, the girl pulled out a diary from the pocket of her robe. What's with that, after rejecting my question? Everything about her is so hard to understand.

"Right then, to start with—"

And then, after listening to her list out the countries she had visited, I had to conclude that she was undoubtedly me, although there were a few minor differences. I had no idea what was going on and I felt like I was going to get a headache.

However, considering how my surroundings were like the epitome of strangeness, I decided to stop thinking about it for the time being.

"Oh well, it must have been some strange quirk of fate that we met here like this, so would you like to go around and look at the city together?"

"Oops, did you fall in love with me after seeing how cute I am? Or maybe you already fell in love with me before, seeing as you're cosplaying as me? Oh well, it's fine. I'll soothe you for a while, although I don't particularly want to."

After another five hundred words or so of such depressing one-sided conversation, she said, "Sure, I'll tag along" and so that's what we ended up doing.

We walked side by side through the city.

Since it was around lunchtime and I was feeling a little hungry, I was eating an apple and the carefree girl who looked identical to me was eating a kebab... hang on, why a kebab?

More importantly,

“Umm, what should I call you?”

“Eh? My name is Elaina.”

“Yes, but my name is Elaina as well.”

I furrowed my eyebrows to show that I was perplexed, but the carefree girl who looked identical to me puffed up her cheeks in annoyance at the same time.

“Hey. That’s because you’re getting into character as me, right? I’m the real me, okay?”

“.....”

From my perspective you’re the imposter... No, if we start arguing here we will never come to an agreement. Just like a foreigner would see me as a foreigner instead, it is obvious that arguing about something that holds true from the other person’s perspective will just go on without end.

As it’s getting annoying, I’ll just give the carefree version the temporary name of “High Me”. Seeing as she’s constantly in high spirits.

“By the way, what was the wish you wanted fulfilled when you came in here? This place is [The Country That Will Grant Your Wish], right? Did you have a wish in mind?”

“What I wish for? That’s obvious!”

She spoke after chomping on the kebab in a wild manner.

“I don’t have anything in particular!”

Uwaah, how idiotic.

“By the way, I came here thinking that it would be nice if I could become wealthy.”

“Uwaah, how idiotic.”

“Sorry, but you’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

“What? Continuing to travel based on your feelings and without thinking about anything is the real fun of being a traveler! Isn’t that right?”

You have a point there, but in your case it’s just that the inside of your head is completely empty, right?

Still, our wishes are completely different, and more importantly, I wonder why the two of us were made to meet each other even though what I wished for was to become rich?

I felt like there was some unseen connection at work here.

After exploring the country for a while, there are two things that I understood.

Firstly, I confirmed that the surroundings here were indeed replicated from places that I had visited on my travels until now.

And as for the second thing...

Apart from those things, there is absolutely nothing else here.

There is not a single thing that is new to me. No matter how many times I looked around my surroundings, There is not a single thing that I don’t know about, and it was indeed looked like a city made from my *deja vu*.

“This is starting to get boring.”

High Me, who just finished eating her seventh kebab skewer of the day, said that. She’s eating too much.

“Well, that’s because there is nothing here which is new.”

I replied to her.

We had already completed a few laps, repeatedly going around the country. In spite of that I couldn't find out a single thing about what kind of place this was, which was troubling.

The idea of a city where there is nothing new is certainly interesting, but if that's all there is to it then it can be visited in one's imagination as well.

No matter how strange it is, after seeing it several times, you get used to it.

"Hmm... I'm full already."

"You've eaten too much kebab."

"Maybe. That could be part of the reason, but these surroundings are to blame as well. It looks like a replica of the different cities I've seen so far, but putting it another way, that's all there is. I'm getting sick and tired of it."

".....I agree."

It looked like she was quite similar to me, despite usually being in such high spirits. She was pretty much thinking about the same things as me.

However.

This city had apparently been constructed based on my thoughts. Just as our boredom was reaching the limit, there was a new development in the tale.

A woman suddenly appeared before my eyes.

There are two twisted horns on her head, and on her back are two bat-like wings.

Unfortunately, this being who appeared before me was not a stranger either, she just looked like another version of me with horns and wings.

"Sheesh, you two are so greedy. Acting like this after i took the trouble to make this city and show you a good time."

Her voice and intonation were basically the same as mine. She just looked like a fairly older version of me, and had a composed demeanor.

Despite the fact that she looked like me, I could tell for sure that she was definitely somebody else.

“Are you one of the residents of this country?”

She nodded.

“That’s right. This [Country That Will Grant Your Wish] is a country that was built for travelers like yourselves.”

“Hoho. Then that makes things simple. What exactly is up with this place? The only things here are those that I have already seen before.”

High Me pulled out the eight kebab.

“It’s [The Country That Will Grant Your Wish], right? In order to grant your wish, it is necessary to look into the minds of travelers and replicate the things that are there. In that case, it is obvious that everything will look familiar.”

I see.

“But my wish was not to revisit all the countries that I had seen before. I came here with the wish to become wealthy.”

“Sure, maybe that was your wish on the surface, but nobody knows what they truly yearn for. Perhaps you were wishing to visit these countries once again, somewhere deep in your heart.”

“.....”

“I see.”

High Me who was standing beside me and munching on her kebab stated her understanding.

“In other words, this is a country that grants the wishes that are hidden away deep inside a person’s heart. Make sure you have a good time. The time limit for this country is another three days. Feel free to relax until then.”

“Hou.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

That last line was again said by High Me who was chomping on her kebab.

“By the way, you don’t need to pay a fee.”

“Seriously?”

“That’s amazing”

“Well, I am the person who founded this country, after all.”

That version of me who gave a small cough and stood with one hand on her hip. I’ll give her the temporary name of [Imp Me]for now. That’s because she looks like a small fry despite being a demon.

And then, Imp Me said,

“Well, that’s how things are, so please use the time to take a break from your traveling. My wish is to give travelers a place where they can relax.”

After saying that, she opened her wings and flew off into the sky.

She appeared all of a sudden and disappeared in the same way.

“.....”

However, it sounded almost too good to be true. It feels somewhat suspicious. Her appearance is obviously that of a demon, after all.

“.....What do you think about the person from earlier?”

After she had disappeared beyond the horizon, I turned towards High Me and asked

that question.

“She’s really generous! Just as I would expect from someone who looks like me!”

“.....”

Not only is High Me carefree, she is also far too trusting.

I was surprised that she could still continue to live as a traveler despite this.

○

Right, then.

Even though I was told to take it easy and relax, I couldn’t seem to get in the mood to do that at all.

I was staying at a cheap hotel (also unmanned) with High Me, but even then I would stay up until late in the night, unable to fall asleep.

Just think about it. There is a person who looks just like me, but her personality is something completely unexpected and she’s carefree to a fault. However, when I spoke to her, I realized that she had also begun her travels in the same way as me, and visited various countries, just like I did.

It’s all so mysterious that I can hardly bear it.

However, there aren’t enough clues for me to look more closely into that mystery.

I wonder what kind of wish led me to meet another version of me in this manner.

Even though it’s about me, I have no idea what kind of wish it was.

On the next day as well, I started exploring the city.

“How about we try going to the royal palace today?”

“Royal Palace? Oh, the place where I met Milarosé-san?”



“That’s right. We just spent the whole day yesterday looking around the city and didn’t go into any of the buildings, right? So let’s take the time today to go through all the buildings that we saw so far.”

“Hoho. You think we’ll find something?”

“We’re going in there to find out.”

In that way, the two of us ended up heading towards the palace.

Just as I had done in the past, I used magic to turn the wooden gate into ash, and the two of us entered the palace.

“.....”

“.....”

Immediately after that,

“Don’t move!”

I understood who that was immediately from the voice. It looked like there was another version of me here as well. Standing in the courtyard on the other side of the gate was me, holding a staff and pointing it in my direction. By the way, she was wearing nerdy looking black-rimmed glasses. I guess I’ll call her [Glasses Me].

“Are the two of you safe me? Or are you bad me?”

Glasses Me glared at us while asking that question.

However, I had no idea what she was saying.

“What the heck is a bad me? I am myself. I am not a bad person or anything.”

“How much did you pay for those glasses~?”

Those were our replies.

“.....”

It looks like she understood something from our responses. Glasses Me slowly lowered her staff and said,

“I see—tell me something, how many other versions of me did the two of you meet so far? Assuming that the imp version of me with the horns and wings is not me, how many versions of me have you seen including me?”

“.....”

There were so many ‘me’ in that sentence that I felt a headache coming on.

“You with the glasses would be the second one. We haven’t met any other versions of me~”

Actually, hang on.

“Excuse me, but how many version of me are there in total?”

“I don’t know how many there are in total... but until now I’ve met fourteen others.”

“Huh?”

“Woah, that’s awesome.”

“By the way, adding the two of you would bring the count up to sixteen.”

“Huh?”

“There are so many people cosplaying as me...? Wow, don’t tell me I’m actually famous.....?”

.....

Oh come on. Sixteen people?

That’s just way too many to handle.

Just like Glasses Me said, there were multiple me's in the throne room of the palace.

While Glasses Me was showing us around, she made us stand in front of all the others, and said in a loud voice,

"Everyone, let me introduce these two. They are Me No.15 and Me No.16."

I heard several replies in my voice coming from various corners of the room. Stuff like, "Ah, nice to meet you." and "Seriously, No.15 and No.16? Don't even think about trying to assert your individuality here, you low-rankers." and "I don't caaaare~". You get the idea.

I see, well I certainly understood that we are not particularly welcome.

"Okay then, newbie me's. Let me introduce the others to you."

And then Glasses Me started pointing them out one by one.

"That's Simpleton Me."

"Hey there, No.15 and No.16! I'm the cutest me here! Ehe~ ☆"

A loud one appeared right off the bat.

"The one acting suspiciously over here is Girl-loving Me."

"Ufufu..... Sixteen me's... Ah, there are so many me's... This place must be heaven."

Rather than saying she loves girls, saying she loves herself might be more appropriate.

"This here is the me who has a bizarre complex about the size of her chest."

"Oh, what's this? The two of you are supposed to be the same as me, but for some reason your breasts are even smaller than mine. What happened? Are you making sure to drink milk regularly? Hmm?"

I honestly came close to falling into despair. By the way, she apparently pads her chest with balls of cotton. How fruitless.

“This here is Slightly Delinquent Me.”

“Huh? Could you not stare at me like that? Know your place, newbies. What is it, assholes? You wanna go? You wanna have a go at me right here? Huh?”

Wow, she looks weak.

“This here is Disgusting Me.”

“Fufufu... If I steal the money from all the me’s here I’ll be rich in no time.....”

Isn’t she’s already pretty much the same as my usual self?

“This here is Unfortunate Me.”

“Uwaah! The Black Dragon thingy that is trapped in my eye is going on a rampage! Everyone, run away!”

True, she is unfortunate, in more ways than one. She’s wearing an eyepatch for some reason as well.

“This here is Maiden-in-love Me.”

“Ehehe... Saya-san, Saya-san, Saya-san, Saya-san.....”

.....? Why Saya-san?

“Hiding over there is the me who is carrying a deep despair within her heart.”

“.....I want to die.”

What happened to make her that way?

“Over here is the me who is carrying a deep despair within her heart (version 2)”

“Don’t wanna... Outside is scary...”

Then why is she a traveler?

“The one over there is also the me who is carrying a deep despair within her heart (version 3)”

“I can’t take it anymore... I just wish all the other me’s here would die...”

How many of them are there? There’s way too much despair over here.

“This one here is Foreigner-influenced Me.”

“Khorosho~”

What is that supposed to mean?

“This here is Gelatinous Me.”

[Ugyuuuu]

This one is not even human.

“And this one is Ghoul Me.”

[Aaaaau]

What on earth happened? Nevermind, I have a pretty good guess.

“And finally, I am Genius Me.”

“You’re saying that about yourself?”

“Well, it’s the truth after all.”

She was puffing out her chest and looking proud of herself. It was somewhat annoying.

Glasses Me, now called Genius Me (self-proclaimed), said,

“I’m sure you already understand, but I’ve been giving all the other me’s here special nicknames to keep from getting them mixed up. In accordance with their individuality.”

“Hohou.”

“So I’d like to think of nicknames for you two as well, but—everyone, what do you think would be good? What kind of character do you think No.15 has?”

Genius Me put her hand on my shoulder and called out the others in the room.

A number of replies came back from all over the room.

“Individuality? I don’t think she has that.”

“No individuality to speak of.”

“No breasts to speak of.”

“No individuality.”

“Yep, no individuality at all~”

“Her lack of personality knows no bounds. She’s not even wearing an eyepatch.”

“Saya-san.”

“I want to die.”

“Me too.”

“I want a death resembling sleep.”

“Khorosho~”

[Ugyuuuu.]

[Uaaaaaah.]

“I see, I see. Everyone, thank you for the feedback. It was very helpful.”

“.....”

I see, these bastards have no intention of having a serious conversation.

Genius Me put on a proud expression and looked at me.

“In that case, I want to give No.15 the nickname ‘Protagonist Me’. What do the rest of you think?”

“What kind of train of thought leads to coming up with such an ambiguous nickname?”

“I tried to forcefully show the demerit of having no individuality in a more positive light.”

“I’m sorry, but I really can’t be happy about it after being told that I have no individuality so many times.”

And then, Genius Me said,

“But isn’t it nice to have no individuality? It means that you can become anything you want, right? It’s the perfect trait for a protagonist.”

It feels like she’s somehow making fun of protagonists.

“By the way, what about No.16?”

“I call her High Me.”

Although this is the first time I’ve said that aloud.

“I see, then we will call her that as well.”

Despite being a genius, it looked like Genius Me was quite irresponsible.

○

“By the way, why are all of you holed up inside this place?”

As I went around introducing myself, I asked each of the others about their journeys so far, and confirmed that although they had traveled to various countries just like me,

their experiences varied somewhat from my own.

Genius Me answered my question.

I think I touched upon the reason for that a little when we first met—it's because there is apparently an evil me who snuck into the country and is hiding somewhere. She is a violent me who attacks the others the moment she encounters them.

“Hou.”

“Seeing as she's violent, the rest of us call her Violent Me.”

“Quite an obvious name, I see.”

From what I heard, it looked like while High Me and I were wandering around the city, the others were being attacked by this Violent Me. Luckily, the two of us were spared from meeting her.

“And so you're staying in here to avoid running into that Violent Me, is that right?”

I was exasperated.

“But the opponent is also the same as us, right? If you fight head on, you should at least be able to force a tie, correct?”

Hearing that, Genius Me slumped her shoulders as if it was her turn to be exasperated.

“Come on, Protagonist Me. Think about it properly. Since the opponent is also me, fighting her would mean hurting myself. If she happened to die, can you imagine what would happen?”

“.....”

“At the very least, the fourteen of us here had no idea what sort of consequences that might have. As there was nothing we could do, we gathered here to discuss the matter and find some solution. Right now, we are split between waiting out the time limit which is another three days, and taking the initiative to go out and fight.”

“I see. By the way, what do you plan to do if this place is attacked?”



“If that happens we will fight, albeit reluctantly. However that is our last resort. Basically, our choices right now are to either continue to stay holed up in here or to capture Violent Me. In other words, we are discussing whether to run away or make a move ourselves.”

“.....Fumu.”

“Now that you have all the facts, which choice do you think is better?”

“Asking me to decide something like that is troubling.”

“What are you talking about? You’re Protagonist Me, aren’t you? If the protagonist doesn’t take the helm at such a critical time, we would be troubled.”

By the way, I am the advisor who assists the protagonist—After adding on that additional comment, Genius Me pushed her glasses up with her fingers.

.....I see, so she orchestrated things from the start and gave me the name Protagonist Me on purpose so that she could make use of me.

Her tactics are brilliant. As expected of me.

However, if that’s how they want to play, then I have a surprise for them as well.

I sat down on the throne and looked down towards the others.

“In that case, everyone here except for me, go out into the city and start the search. I’ll sit here and wait for you to return—How’s that for a plan?”

Almost immediately, the booing started.

“What does this asshole think she’s saying?”

“I am opposed to dictatorship!”

“Stop fooling around, is your brain even below that of a flea?”

“I cannot agree to that.”

“Completely out of the question.”

“Please resign from being the protagonist.”

Et cetera. My one statement caused a massive reaction.

Look at them, saying whatever they want.

What the hell, after arbitrarily setting me up to the protagonist, this is what I get when I act like one and take command. There should be a limit for looking down on people.

I might turn into a Violent Me as well, you know?

“In that case, let me hear what ideas you have come up with—”

That’s when it happened.

Sitting on the throne, I locked away the murky feelings that threatened to rise to the surface and raised my voice, when,

—Boom!

The door to the throne room was opened quite violently—no, it was blown off its hinges, and fell heavily on top of two of me who were relaxing in the chamber.

Splat. Along with the roar of the explosion, a wet sound could be heard.

“Aah! Ghoul Me died! She got squashed!”

“Ugh, that’s so gross!”

“Uwaah, the rotting smell is so bad.”

“I bet she died in an instant.”

[Aaaauuuuu]

“Oh, she’s alive.”

I'm glad she's okay.

"Oh, Gelatinous Me got squashed as well and turned into some sort of gel."

"Wasn't she gel to begin with?"

"Good point."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Sorry for making a scene, it looks like both of them are fine after all."

I'm glad they're fine.

"Aah, no wonder I couldn't find any of you. You were all gathered here, huh?"

In this sort of loose atmosphere lacking any tension, an extremely cold voice echoed from near the door. Of course, this was my voice as well, and the one who blew open the door was also certainly me.

"That's perfect. I'll just dispose of all of you here without letting a single one of you escape."

After saying that, she showed a slight smile and walked over towards me.

Her hair had been cut short—in fact, it looked to be about the same length as when my hair had been cut off by a doll in a certain country.

She was also giving off the same sort of sullen atmosphere that I had back then.

Don't tell me...

"Excuse me. Is that Violent Me?"

"That's right."

Genius Me nodded once and replied.

“.....The one sitting in the throne over there, are you the leader of this lot?”

Violent Me glared at me.

“I don’t know whether I am the leader or not, but the others here call me Protagonist Me.”

“I see, I see—so that’s how it is. You’re the protagonist, are you? You, sitting there and laughing frivolously, are the protagonist?”

Saying that, she pointed her staff at me.

Immediately after that.

A number of spears appeared from the tip of the staff, and,

“This displeases me. Please die.”

Along with Violent Me’s cold declaration, the spears came hurtling towards me.

As the spears rushed straight toward me as if they were being drawn towards the throne, I created the same number of spears and shot them out in the opposite direction while following the same trajectory, thereby intercepting all of her attacks.

As the sound of metal objects colliding echoed, the fragments of what had been spears rained down and were scattered all over the room.

I looked down towards her.

“I have no idea what is driving you to attack all of us, but—do you think you can win against all sixteen of us?”

“Ah, Gelatinous Me and Ghoul Me were crushed by the door, so it’s only fourteen of us.”

Genius Me interjected with a correction from beside me.

“.....Do you think you can win against all fourteen of us?”

However, despite the fact that she was obviously at a disadvantage, Violent Me

laughed.

It was a daring and cold laugh that made me unable to feel anything.

“I don’t live in the sort of carefree world that all of you are from. I am different from all of you.”

What on earth is she talking about?

“Don’t tell me, haven’t any of you looked in a mirror? Are you all really supposed to be me?”

○

And so the war had officially begun.

Me and the the thirteen others threw ourselves at her in an attempt to subdue her.

Violent Me took that scene in calmly, and started to deal with us one by one.

The first victim was Simpleton Me. With a dull ‘Eiyah’ shout that lacked any will to fight, she created iron chains from the tip of her staff, but the chains were reflected back towards her immediately and she ended up bound head to toe in iron chains, squirming like a caterpillar.

Next was was the one who had a bizarre complex about the size of her chest. Violent Me closed the distance with her in an instant, ripped the cotton pads out of her chest, and sent her flying with a kick.

“Aaaah, my breasts.....”

And so, her consciousness was taken away along with her cotton pads. Goodbye.

After that came the three who were carrying a deep despair within their hearts. These three actually put up a decent fight.

“I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared!”

“Hiiiiii! Don’t come any closer!”

“I want to go home!”

Despite saying such things, they created a beam of fire, a beam of water, and a beam of lightning from their staffs respectively. The three beams writhed and entangled with each other, and fell up Violent Me.

Violent Me retreated as she avoided their attacks and ran outside the castle.

I found out that her movements were actually a trap when the three who were carrying a deep despair within their hearts chased after her. When the three of them ran outside, they found that the ground outside the palace had been turned soft like a swamp. The three of them sank into the ground up to their necks, at which point the ground turned solid again.

“...Fufufu. It feels like we are about to be executed.”

“The ground feels nice and cold, I feel like it’s calming me down.”

“I want to just become part of the soil like this...”

After glancing at the three who were feeling relaxed for some reason after getting trapped easily, the rest of us took to the sky on our brooms. However, Violent Me was nowhere to be found, and we kept looking all over the surroundings for her.

And then, out of the nine of us who remained, four were suddenly ensnared by rope that came flying out of one of the houses, and were pulled down and smashed against the roof of the house.

By the time Violent Me appeared in front of us once again, Foreigner-influenced Me, Maiden-in-love Me, Disgusting Me, and Girl-loving Me had been taken down in one swoop.

The remaining five of us tried our best to fight against her, but for some reason there seemed to be a great difference in ability between her and us, as she was able to stay calm and composed even when taking on five of us at the same time.

“Why you—!”

Slightly Delinquent Me let out a cute war cry like that and attempted to close the distance with her while flying on her broom, but Violent Me easily dodged her, and almost like it was an afterthought, she knocked the staff out of Slightly Delinquent Me's hand, thereby rendering her harmless. Violent Me then hit her on the back of her neck with the staff in her own hand and rendered her unconscious.

Seeing Slightly Delinquent Me fall down on the roof of a house like a rag doll, Unfortunate Me, Genius Me, and High Me surrounded Violent Me and started firing magic towards her from their staves.

A rain of spears, a writhing dragon made from water that moved like it was intelligent, and a mass of magical energy that gave off a pale blue light all flew towards her, but Violent Me still dealt with all of them in a calm and composed manner.

She intercepted the rain of spears by hitting them with spears of her own just as I had done in the palace, turned the writhing water into ice and smashed it to pieces, and dodged the mass of magical energy. She then escaped from the sight of the three of them, and hit them with magic of her own to restrain them.

Unable to move and stuck to each other, the three of them fell to the ground near the palace entrance.

The three of them slightly nodded their heads in greeting towards the three who were carrying a deep despair within their hearts, who were stuck in the ground with just their heads above the surface.

“.....”

And then.

After taking care of all the others except for me in a few minutes, Violent Me landed on one of the roofs that resembled the ones from a certain country where I had taught magic to a certain black-haired girl, and got off her broom.

That was because I was there.

“Aren't you going to fight? Although all the others were being defeated, you chose to just watch?”

She looked at me with a reproachful expression.

“That’s because you appeared to be very confident about yourself. If you’re confident, that means you have some sort of plan. It’s obvious that I don’t stand a chance if I just rushed in towards you without thinking”

“Well then, what is the result of your observation?”

“I thought that you are not the sort of opponent whom I have no chance of beating.”

In the end, the enemy opponent is still me.

“How impertinent.”

“Indeed. Just like you.”

“.....”

Violent Me just glared back at me without saying anything.

I looked straight back into her eyes, and asked,

“—By the way, why is your hair cut short?”

Oh wait, let me rephrase that.

“Why is your hair still cut short?”

“.....”

If I remember correctly, that incident where my hair was cut short happened a few weeks ago when I visited that country where the buildings were all faced with red bricks. After my hair was cut short by the Slasher who used dolls to cut off the hair of young girls, I had managed to capture the criminal on the very next day.

Why is Violent Me still stuck with that appearance?

“You know the reason why my hair was cut off like this, correct?”



“Well, yes, as mine was cut off too.”

On the other hand, in the stories of all the others, there was no incident of having had their hair cut off. I spent some time to ask every one of them about their stories when we were inside that palace, but although they had met Sheila-san, it was apparently after she had settled the issue by herself.

It appears that while we are all me, we did not follow the exact same paths in life.

“It is true that my hair was cut off in that country. However, I lacked the willpower to return my hair to normal. That’s why I have continued to travel like this, with my short hairstyle.”

“.....”

She lacked the willpower? Why was that?

“Did you visit the Clocktower City, Rostalf?”

Violet Me was looking at me with her eyes clouded with darkness. They were like the eyes of a dead person.

“Yes, I did.”

I naturally nodded in answer to her question. I even pointed to the clocktower that stood to the side of the roof we were standing on and added, “It was a good country.”

“.....It was a good country? That place? You call that a good country?”

“Well, yes—”

It was a lovely country with a clocktower standing in the heart of the country with popular plays. In particular, the play about [Estelle of the Second District] was perfect for passing the time. It was a play about the life of a witch called Estelle, who came to detest evildoers after her close friend was killed by a random attacker when she was a child. The fact that they cheaped out on the ending and just said[Her fight will not end until the day she finds the one who killed her best friend] was slightly regrettable, but it served quite well to keep me from getting bored.

“Was there something else?”

I tilted my head and looked towards her.

That’s when I realized that Violent Me, who was standing in front of me, was acting strangely.

“As I thought, I am different from the rest of you.”

She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone while gripping her staff tightly.

“In that country, I went ten years back in time. I went back in time to save a person. However, what I saw there was a reality that was more horrible than anything, and in the end not a single person was saved..... have you ever seen it? The instant when love turns to hate, right before your eyes? The instant during which a person tries to kill a person whom they loved until just a short while ago—”

“No, I haven’t.”

I interrupted her before she could finish.

“I have no idea what happened to you, but in short, because of those horrible things that you saw, you didn’t have the willpower to restore your hair when it was cut off and have been living like that in self-abandonment?”

In the next instant.

She pointed her staff at me and fired off several spheres of ice.

And what’s more, she also said,

“I am not living in self-abandonment. I am so angry that I can’t control myself.”

“Hou. What are you angry at?”

I asked her that while dodging all the ice spheres.

“That’s obvious—I’m angry at myself.”

She continued to speak.

“I’m angry at the others who are nonchalantly continuing their travels unlike me. I am angry at myself for not being able to do anything even when those horrible things were happening right before me.”

What a horrible temper tantrum.

As expected of me.

○

After that, the two of us began a small war.

To begin with, she created a number of icicles using her staff and shot them towards me. After dodging them, I paid her back in kind by lifting the roof tiles at my feet with magic and firing them at her from all directions.

As if she had known all along that I would do that, she shot the roof tiles out of the air with icicles and then created a massive ball of ice in mid air. It looked like Violent Me really liked to attack using ice.

The large sphere of ice fell straight down toward me, but big attacks like that just look flashy and are actually not that hard to handle.

I got on my broom and easily avoided it. The house it landed on ended up getting crushed instead, but that doesn’t really matter.

Seeing as roof tiles weren’t of any use, this time I lifted up an entire house with magic and threw it at her. However, she came out of that without a scratch. It looks like she made a wall of ice around herself just before impact. Damn this ice-loving maniac.

The fight after that was extremely simple.

She would use magic to create ice and throw it at me. I would dodge that, and use magic to throw one of the several houses that were around that area at her.

Since it looked like she liked flashy attacks, I chose to respond with flashy attacks as well.

Still creating ice as she had been doing since before, she shouted,

“People like you—People like you should just disappear!”

“Who are you saying that to? Is it me? Or yourself?”

“.....Shut up.”

She continued to speak.

“Don’t you understand why I was led to this country? This is a country that grants wishes. I’m sure that I came here because I could not forgive you for traveling nonchalantly without experiencing any painful memories. I came here to make sure that all of you experience the sort of things that I did—That’s why you’re here as well.”

“That may be your wish, but it is not ours.”

I tried to stay as calm as possible while I replied in that manner.

“While it is true that this country will grant my wish, it will also grant all of our wishes. That is why, your perception of the situation is flawed. It is very, very flawed.”

After coming to this country and running into so many other versions of me, there is one thing I thought of.

Didn’t Imp Me—in other words, the creator of this country—say it as well?

—Nobody knows what they truly yearn for.

—Perhaps you were wishing to visit these countries once again, somewhere deep in your heart.

In other words, there might be something that I wished for more strongly in my heart, than the frivolous wish of [wanting to become rich] that I was thinking about on the surface.

“Even if that is true—”

Her voice was trembling.

“Even if that is true, so what!? What caused all of us to assemble here, in this place!?”

“Do you not understand?”

I gave a simple answer to her question.

“Or are you pretending to not understand?”

“Don’t look down on me!”

And then.

She started firing masses of ice towards me one after the other.

As for me, I continued to endlessly turn the inside of the country into rubble.

Unfortunately, our abilities were basically the same, and no matter how much magic we threw at each other, there was no clear end in sight—although since I was equal to her even though she had fought with and defeated the others before me, I might be just a little bit weaker in comparison.

Right then, this might sound like a question out of the blue, but do you know how the wars that have been fought in history came to an end? In my opinion, most of them ended in either of two ways.

The first is where one side obtained a perfect victory. The one who is stronger becomes righteous, and the loser becomes the bad guy. It is a way of winning that leaves a very bad aftertaste.

Fortunately, the fight between us did not come to such an end. Our abilities were completely equal, so there was no way that one of us could dominate and win against the other.

In other words, the battle between us came to the other type of ending.

“.....”

“.....”

It was probably a few hours since we had started fighting.

By the time we realized it, the two of us were staring up at the sky in the country where half of the buildings had been turned into rubble, and the country was quite literally half destroyed.

The sky was somewhat refreshing, like a storm had just passed. There was a light grey cloud floating in the sky and spreading out.

Both of us were almost completely out of magical energy.

We both exhausted our stores of energy, and the concepts of good and evil became blurred as we both ran out of strength. This was the second method I was talking about, and it was also the way in which our fight ended.

And every once in a while, this sort of conclusion will only lead to one thing.

“.....Just why did I come to this country?”

She muttered those words.

“Before I answer that, let me tell you what I vaguely wished for in my heart.”

I answered her while gazing at the sky.

“I’m sure that I came here to meet all these different versions of myself.”

It is said that this country grants wishes.

I’m sure that I strongly desired to explore more possibilities.

To travel means to be faced with continuous meetings and partings, and at the same time, it is a continuous series of choices as well. Looking back on my choices, there have been times when I missed meeting some strange and interesting people, and sometimes when I got to know some strange and weird people as well.

However, what would my life have been like if I didn’t miss meeting those interesting

people? What would my life have been like if I managed to avoid meeting those weird people?

What would my life have been like if I had other possibilities instead of my own?

I'm sure that I was wishing for those possibilities. That is why I came to this country and met the other versions of myself.

"That still doesn't explain why I came here."

Oh, that is not the case at all.

"It explains it perfectly. You, just like me, were yearning to see a different side of yourself. What led you here is your yearning to find a version of yourself who wasn't caught in the whirlpool of sadness that you found in the Clocktower City, Rostalf."

"....."

"I don't think you hate us as much as you think you do. You came here because you wished for different possibilities—a version of you that did not experience those sad events. By no means did you come here to hurt the rest of us, you came here because you wished for those different possibilities somewhere in your heart."

"....."

She definitely did not come here because she wished to hurt the rest of us.

She came here to be healed instead.

I'm sure it's the same for the rest of us. We all came here because we wished to explore those other possibilities.

".....That's pretty selfish."

She pretended to not understand as she spoke in a critical tone.

"It's not wrong to wish for other possibilities for yourself, you know."

Also,

“You said it was selfish, but the only people here are yourself, right?”

Saying that, I held her hand.

Her slender, white fingers initially twitched as if rejecting my touch, but then intertwined themselves with mine.

“.....Are you willing to hear me out? About what I experienced in that country, when I traveled ten years back in time?”

She stopped gazing at the sky, and looked at me instead.

I also looked back at her.

“That’s why I came here.”

And so, our battle came to an end.

The second method of finishing a battle, where there are no winners or losers.

We reached an amicable settlement.

○

Let’s talk about what happened afterwards.

I walked around with Violent Me, now renamed to Short-haired Me, and looked for the other versions of me.

Seeing as the city had been basically reduced to rubble, we were worried that some of them might have been crushed by falling buildings or masses of ice, but every one of them somehow made it out of that just fine.

“Still, it was an amazing battle.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to pull everyone out of that mess?”

“Please keep the idiotic horseplay to a minimum.”



“Fighting with ourselves, we’ve done some pretty silly stuff, haven’t we?”

“You idiot.”

Or rather, they had already been found and recovered.

The others had already been taken back to the royal palace before we had a chance to do anything.

“.....”

“.....”

By the way, the ones who were scolding us a moment ago were other versions of me whom we hadn’t met yet, and they had retrieved the others from the rubble.

If you’re wondering what they had been doing all this while, apparently they had been hiding somewhere in the country and waiting for the time limit to expire.

Since there are so many version of me, I’m sure that these were the ones who wanted to remain as bystanders during this incident.

“Still, seeing so many versions of me in the same place is pretty strange. It’s kind of unsettling.”

Hearing that, High Me responded,

“It’s a little late for that. Actually, you’re all just cosplaying as me, right? I’m sure you are all just getting into character as me.”

It looks like her head is still in the clouds.

“So, what do you plan to do now? According to Imp Me—the one that looks like a demon, we still have around one day of time left.”

As Genius Me said that while touching her glasses, the versions of me who wanted to be bystanders made suspicious expressions.

“In the first place, is it okay to trust that demon-looking version of me?”

“That girl is pretty shady.”

“I’m sure she’s hiding something.”

“I’m sure she’s been controlling everything from the shadows.”

They were all valid observations.

However.

“Putting it another way, it means that we can do whatever we want for one more day, right? Since she said the time limit of this country was another three days, then that means something bad will only happen after those three days, correct?”

“I see.”

“As expected of the one who proclaims herself to be the protagonist.”

“That means it should be fine to stay here until those three days end, right?”

“I’m saving a lot of money on inn charges, so it’s great.”

It looks like the bystander versions basically had no interest in earning money but they were also against wasteful expenditure, and greatly liked this country where everything was free of cost.

And so, we all went into the city and had fun to our hearts content.

We ate whatever we wanted, and drank whatever we wanted.

After going wild as much as I wanted, I held up a glass of wine and stood in front of the others.

“Everyone, playing around is fine and all—but may I suggest something?”

It’s not everyday that so many versions of me all assemble in one place.

Just spending our time playing would be a waste.

“Everyone, do you have a diary in the pocket of your robe?”

That is why, while we are still basking in the memories of our travel, let’s do something to remember it by.

All of us brought our diaries out and collected them together.

It looked like all of us had indeed walked different paths in our lives. For example, a particular day that I spent while just being bored turned out to be a day when another version of me had a destined meeting, etc.

Just like Short-haired Me had experienced very painful memories in the Clocktower Country of Rostalf whereas I had just spent several days there sightseeing, even though we were all the same person, we each had different tales to tell.

I had been thinking that it might be unexpectedly interesting to collate the stories from everyone’s diaries, ever since I met High Me and we went to the palace together.

Since I have one day left over in any case, I decided to implement that idea.

All of us assembled in the hall of the palace, and read each other’s diaries in turn.

“Oh I see, in that country where the prices of commodities were being jacked up, it would have been fine to just pretend to be a fortune teller...”

“It looks like Fran-sensei was the same, no matter which version of us she was dealing with.”

“Her personality as a worthless person is unshakeable.”

“Ah, the Country of Honesty...”

“Saya-san was so incredibly cute in that country, it was the best.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“Don’t you mean incredibly crazy?”

“You say that, but weren’t you happy when she gave you that necklace?”

“.....”

[Aaaaauuuu]

“I wonder how Ghoul Me turned into a ghoul.”

“She probably didn’t manage to escape from the Paradise of the Dead.”

“How stupid of her.”

“Indeed.”

“By the way, why are you wearing an eyepatch?”

“This is because of the Black Dragon—”

“Ah, that’s enough.”

“Hey, aren’t your breasts kind of large?”

“This is because I used cotton pads—”

“Ah, that’s enough.”

I sat in the throne while looking at the others sitting on the ground and talking noisily.

“As promised, I will listen to your story.”

“.....”

Sitting on the armrest of the throne and leaning her shoulder against the backrest, Short-haired Me pulled her diary out of her pocket.

“In that country, I—”

And so, I accepted her diary from her, and gave her mine instead.

For a little while after that, the two of us were engrossed in reading each other's tales.

There were several things that we all had in common.

In every country we visited, we met those people that we were fated to meet without fail. For example, all of us met Saya-san in the Country of Magicians, and we all met her again in the Country of Honesty. In that manner, we all met the same people in the same countries.

And we also parted from them in the same way.

Also, this might be only natural, but we all started our travels for the same reason, and we all had the same teacher. The differences in our tales regarding these were trivial, and the manner in which we all aimed to become witches because of [The Adventures of Nike] and then trained under Fran-sensei was identical.

After we had finished reading each other's tales, one of us suddenly made a proposal.

"Wouldn't this make for a pretty interesting book? It would kind of be like [The Adventures of Nike ]."

Not a single one of us was opposed to that idea, and as if it was something that we all wished for, we nodded in unison.

In the end, we managed to agree upon a title for the finished book.

There were multiple contenders, but in the end, my suggestion was picked by a majority vote.

Since our favorite book was called [The Adventures of Nike], it would have been okay to call our book [The Adventures of Elaina], but if we did that we would just be repeating the mistakes of a certain person somewhere who wants to erase their embarrassing past. Moreover, the title would just be lacking in originality.

As expected, a contrary title would be best for a contrary person like me.

And that is why we ended up with this title.

On the morning of the third day.

There were many versions of me (especially the bystander versions) who strongly refused to leave the country, but there was no way to tell what would happen here after this.

And so, we ended up (somewhat forcefully) giving all of them a copy of [Majo no Tabitabi] and chasing them out of the country.

As reparation for turning the country into rubble, Short-haired Me and I stayed back in the country and went around looking for other versions of me who might still be hiding somewhere.

“Looks like there wasn’t anyone else, after all.”

“That’s right.”

I nodded to Short-haired Me.

After looking at me for a while, she turned back to look at the country. The morning sun shined on us from one part of the city that we had barely managed to keep from destroying, and gave her ash-grey hair a pale scarlet sheen.

Looking at the beautiful spectacle, she had a slightly lonely expression on her face.

“What do you plan on doing from now on?”

When I asked her that, she lightly stroked her hair that had become short.

“I think I’ll go back and retrieve my hair. It’s probably still implanted in some doll.”

“I see.”

“Yes—The criminal is already in custody, after all, so all that’s left is to find the doll.”

“I hope you find it.”

“Thank you.”

Neither one of us said goodbye.

Since we are both the same person, calling it a parting would be strange. I felt that it would be strange to say goodbye to someone whom I would see every time I looked in a mirror.

.....

Or at least, that was the reason on the surface.

The truth was probably that we just didn't want to say goodbye.

And so.

She said,

“Thank you, Elaina-san.”

And I replied,

“You're welcome, Elaina-san.”

After just exchanging those words, she went out of the country.

○

There was one last thing that I had to do.

“I'm alone now.”

I spoke out to nobody in particular. My voice echoed loudly in the country that had fallen completely silent, I felt like it would have carried throughout the country even if I didn't raise my voice.

As if to prove that, the girl I was waiting for heard my voice and came to me.

The girl, who possessed two twisted horns, flapped her bat-like wings as she landed in front of me.

“You called?”

It was Imp Me.

“Yes. There was something that I wanted to talk to you about, no matter what.”

“I don’t have anything I want to talk to you about in particular, though.”

“.....”

I shot a glance towards the girl who trying to crack jokes.

“Somewhere along the line, I realized your true identity.”

“Rather than talk about my true identity, I want to make you take responsibility for wrecking my country instead.”

Hah, very funny.

“This place is inside a dream, isn’t it? I don’t think there is anything to take responsibility for.”

“.....Hou.”

Coming to a country that is said to grant wishes, meeting several different versions of myself, and moreover, the country is patterned after the various places I had visited in the past.

There was one conclusion that I drew from this place where so many impossible events overlapped.

This whole place is inside my dream, and this entire dream is being shown to me by this Imp Me.

That is my line of reasoning, although I had no proof.



However, this argument was pretty convincing.

“From the appearance of this country—the appearance of this country that seems to be crammed full of ideal things, I remembered what happened at a certain country.”

It was the sad incident that happened in a certain country where all the citizens fell into their dreams and became lifeless husks—except for one young woman who was left behind all alone.

All the citizens of that country who fell into a peaceful sleep were lured into their ideal dreams that were created by a certain demon, and once three days passed, they died for no apparent reason.

Three days.

It was the same as the time limit that Imp Me had indicated.

“You were probably feeding on the lives of people by interfering with their dreams and locking them away in their ideal dreams. I am also one such person—Am I wrong?”

“Hohou.”

After giving a slight smile, she shook her head.

“Close, but not quite. You are not one of them yet.”

“Well, that’s true. Strictly speaking, it hasn’t been three days yet.”

There are still a few hours left.

“So, what do you plan to do? Stay here and become food for me?”

“Of course not. Why do you think I wrecked the country to such an extent and drove all the others out from here?”

“.....”

Well, the fact that the country was wrecked so badly is more or less a coincidence, but

the reason I drove all the others out of the country was because I had a plan.

Most likely, the other versions of me that I met this time were created from other possibilities that she saw in my memories. In other words, they are all my imagination and I created them because I longed to explore those other opportunities.

“If this place is solely within my dream and no one else’s, then this place no longer contains any of my hopes or wishes. There is absolutely no reason for me to stay within this dream.”

“.....Well played. That’s quite unfortunate. I thought that a witch’s life would be quite delicious.”

“Playing this sort of underhanded trick on witches to feed on their lives will have the opposite effect.”

I took out my staff.

“Now, let me out of this world right now. Or else—”

“Or what, you’re going to punish me? Hahaha, are you an idiot or something?”

After cackling, she continued to speak.

“You can go back to the regular world if you just go through the gate. In the first place, I accept everyone who comes to me, and don’t chase those who wish to leave. If you want to run away, feel free.”

Saying so, she waved her hand as if telling me to run along.

“.....Have you consumed the lives of many people in this manner to date?”

Has she been giving three ideal days to people, and devouring the lives of those who want to stay even after the time limit is crossed?

“Well, of course. If I didn’t do that, I’d starve.”

“.....So human lives are your food, huh. Don’t you feel any guilt about ruining the lives of people who have done nothing wrong?”

“To me, human lives are nothing more than ingredients. It’s not like you feel sorry about eating meat from livestock, right?”

“.....”

“Your expression tells me that you can’t sympathize with me. I didn’t particularly want you to sympathize with me either. Beings like me are fundamentally different from humans. I never expected that we would come to an understanding in the first place.”

“.....That’s unfortunate. If you used that power for a better purpose, you could have helped a lot of people.”

“Hahaha, as I thought, you’re an idiot. Why would I want to work so hard for the sake of mere livestock?”

She said it frankly.

—Fundamentally different from humans.

I see, it appears that demons are indeed that sort of beings.

“Oh, I remembered something. I don’t mean to hold you back here, but I have a little bit of good news for you.”

“.....What is it?”

She spoke out to me just as I was about to leave the country.

She spoke in her usual light-hearted manner.

“—You were not the only version of you to come to this place.”

Every version of you that you saw here was real—that’s what she told me.

○

The sky was somewhat refreshing, like a storm had just passed. There was a light grey cloud floating in the sky and spreading out.

The wind blew over the grass-covered plain while making a rustling sound, and caused a light-green ripple to spread out. Underneath the warm sunlight, the scent of the newly arriving spring that still had traces of winter in it tickled my nose.

The only things that I saw were blue, green, and just a little bit of white.

“.....Where am I?”

It looks like had fallen into a deep sleep, right in the middle of a wide prairie.

How long had I been asleep? My memories from before falling asleep are vague, and I can't really remember. Why on earth was I sleeping in the middle of a prairie?

However, my memories of the time when I was asleep are very clear.

“.....”

And so, I had a sudden idea.

Since I can't remember what happened before I fell asleep, let me check my diary. It's the perfect tool for when your memories are vague. It should be right here, in my pocket.

“.....This is—”

When I was fishing inside my robe, I found my diary, along with one other book.

On the front page of the simply bound book were the title and my name. Handwritten.

“.....”

It was, without a doubt, the book that we had created inside that dream. Ah, now that I think about it, I seem to remember that people who manage to leave the dream are allowed to take any one thing with them when they leave.

I see, so in my case it was this book.

I stared at the two books for a while, and eventually returned one of them to my

pocket.

“.....I can read the diary later.”

I can go back to traveling after I finish reading this book. Spending that amount of time for my leisure should be fine.

Besides, right now I feel like immersing myself in my memories a for a while.

And so, I sat down on the prairie with my knees bent.

I turned the cover page of the book, as if the cool wind was hurrying me along.

What was written inside was certainly my tale.



# Afterword

It has been a while. I am Shiraishi Jougi.

Time passes quickly, and two years have already gone by since I first released [Majo no Tabitabi] as a self-published book. At that time, I certainly never imagined that my books would be commercially published someday, and yet here I am writing an afterword for one of them. Life is a mysterious thing.

Anyway, this was [Majo no Tabitabi] Volume 3.

In this volume, there were many things like a casual reference to the title of the book, and Elaina-san's hair being cut short. Actually, I vaguely remember saying something along the lines of, "There is no particular meaning behind the title of the book, no such word exists," but how do I put it; that was likely said by a version of me from a different world, and I will be very glad if you accept it with such a reason in mind.

Back when I wrote Volume 2, I was in the mindset where I was thinking, Aah! I want to write dark stories! and I kept sending dark stories over to my editor, and maybe due to that, the overall tone of that volume was quite dark. I have learned my lesson. Due to that, I decided to just about fill this volume with cheerful stories (that does not mean that there are no dark stories at all).

I still have a few lines left until I say thank you, so I would like to write about four lines going into the world of [Majo no Tabitabi] in depth.

I first thought of Elaina's character around five years ago. I think at that time she was just a cute girl who flew over here from another world, but after about three years passed, she became somewhat cynical, she turned into a traveler, and the "other world" concept went out the window. Truly, stories are mysterious things.

Anyway, that came out to exactly four lines, so it is time to say thanks.

Azuuru-sama.

Thank you for providing such cute illustrations for this volume as well. I have received several character designs and drawings of various aspects of Elaina so far, but I personally love the short-haired Elaina-san very much. So much so that when you showed me the rough sketch for Volume 3's cover, I thought, Oh wow, is this an angel? Thank you so much.

My editor, M-sama.

Thank you for not abandoning me despite my tendency to keep writing dark stories, and your thorough comments through the completion of the manuscript for Volume 3. On an unrelated note, I personally think that the fact that M-san's daughter reads [Majo no Tabitabi] was the most important news of the year.

And finally, to all the readers.

The fact that this series has reached three volumes is solely because of the ratings given by the readers. Thank you so much. I am honored that the characters that appear in [Majo no Tabitabi] receive so much love.

Since each volume is limited to fourteen chapters, that makes a total of forty two stories so far and a proportionately large number of pages, but I have nothing but appreciation for all of you for sticking with me so far.

And now.

From here on out, I will assume that the reader has already read all fourteen chapters of volume 3.

I think that the people who read to the end of Chapter 14 might have already guessed this, and they would be correct for the most part. The series [Majo no Tabitabi] that is being published under G.A Novel is at an end, for now.

And at the same time, I will be starting on a new series.

*I would like to make it a series that will be appreciated by the people who love Elaina in this book. Or rather, I would like to write a sequel with the same worldview. By the way, Cagliostro-chan from [Granblue] is really cute.*

The above is an outline of the conference I had with my editor, M-san, and after a



meeting regarding the plot with the editorial department, it was decided that I would be writing a new series with the same worldview as [Majo no Tabitabi] under the GA Bunko label. It is a story where two protagonists work on solving an incident that occurs in a certain country (tentative).

This time, it will be published as a paperback so there won't be any reason to hesitate over where to buy it, and it will also be at around half the price (sales promotion). Also, I said that it was a new series with the same worldview, but in truth it is basically like a sequel of [Majo no Tabitabi](shameless sales promotion). So of course, Elaina-san will be appearing in it as well, in fact she is one of the main characters and will be conspicuous with her trademark rotten personality and polite speech (extremely shameless sales promotion). Also, it seems that Azuuru-san will continue to be in charge of the illustrations (hooray!).

It will be released... around Spring 2017, maybe... possibly (wishful thinking).

Well, it's something like that.

And so, [Majo no Tabitabi] has ended for now, but I will be counting on your support in the future as well.

Author: Shiraishi Jougi

Planned to take a fifteen minute nap, but ended up sleeping for a whole three hours.  
Story of my life.

Illustration: Azuuru

After drawing the cover illustration, I thought short hair is nice as well~ that's my impression of Volume 3.



PDF by: traitorAIZEN